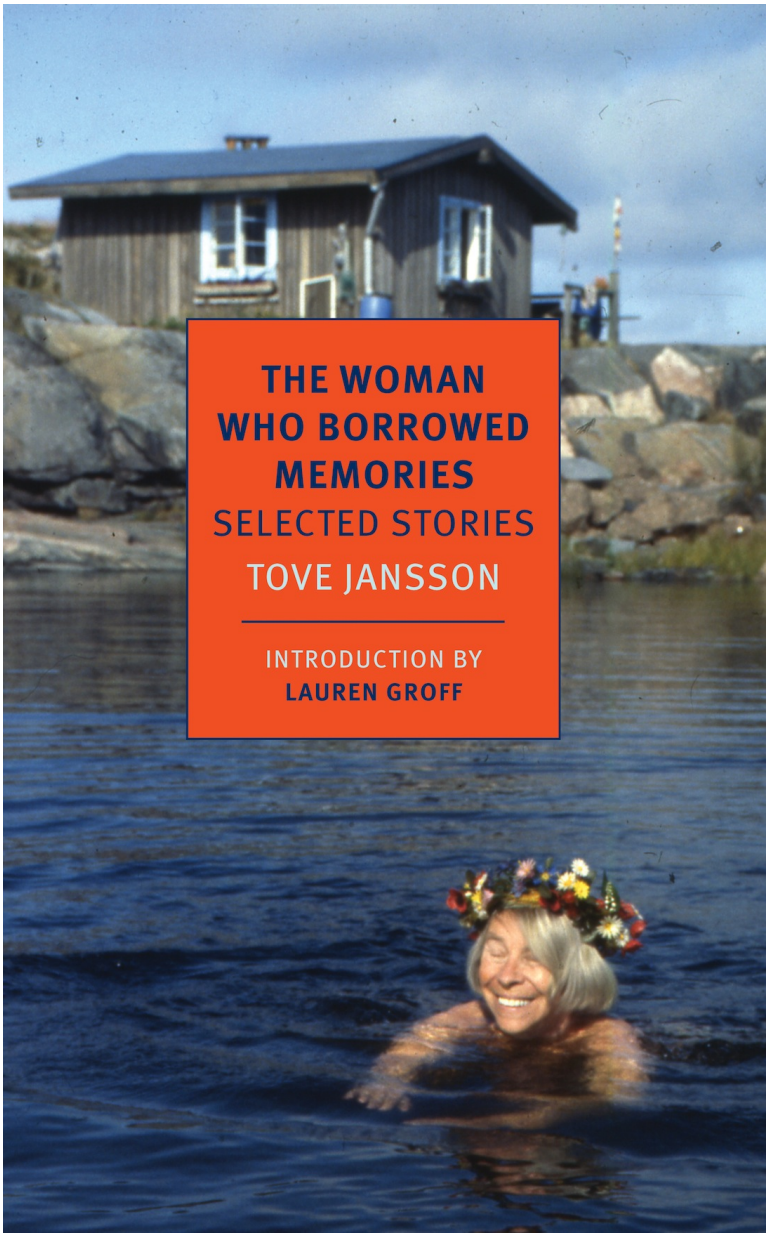
THE WOMAN WHO BORROWED MEMORIES
SELECTED STORIES
TOVE JANSSON
INTRODUCTION BY
LAUREN GROFF

TOVE JANSSON (1914–2001) was born in Helsinki into Finland's Swedish-speaking minority. Her father was a sculptor and her mother a graphic designer and illustrator. Winters were spent in the family's art-filled studio and summers in a fisherman's cottage in the Pellinge archipelago, a setting that would later figure in Jansson's writing for adults and children. Jansson loved books as a child and set out from an early age to be an artist. Her first illustration was published when she was fifteen years old; four years later a picture book appeared under a pseudonym. After attending art schools in both Stockholm and Paris, she returned to Helsinki, where in the 1940s and '50s she won acclaim for her paintings and murals. From 1929 until 1953 Jansson drew humorous illustrations and political cartoons for the left-leaning anti-Fascist Finnish-Swedish magazine *Garm*, and it was there that what was to become Jansson's most famous creation, Moomintroll, a hippopotamus-like character with a dreamy disposition, made his first appearance. Jansson went on to write about the adventures of Moomintroll, the Moomin family, and their curious friends in a long-running comic strip and in a series of books for children that have been translated throughout the world, inspiring films, several television series, an opera, and theme parks in Finland and Japan. Jansson also wrote eleven novels and short-story collections for adults, including *The Summer Book, The True Deceiver*, and *Fair Play* (available as NYRB Classics). In 1994 she was awarded the Prize of the Swedish Academy. Jansson and her companion, the artist Tuulikki Pietilä, continued to live part time in a cottage on the remote outer edge of Pellinge until 1991.

THOMAS TEAL has translated many of Tove Jansson's works into English, beginning in the 1970s with *The Summer Book* and *Sun City* and more recently, *The True Deceiver* (2009, winner of the Best Translated Book Award) and *Fair Play* (2011, winner of the Bernard Shaw Prize for translation from the Swedish). He lives in Massachusetts.

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LAUREN GROFF is the author of the novels *Arcadia* and *The Monsters of Templeton*, and *Delicate Edible Birds*, a story collection. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker, Harper's*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, as well as in the Pushcart Prize, PEN/O. Henry, and Best American Short Stories anthologies. She lives in Gainesville, Florida.

THE WOMAN WHO BORROWED MEMORIES

Selected Stories

TOVE JANSSON

Translated from the Swedish by

THOMAS TEAL and
SILVESTER MAZZARELLA

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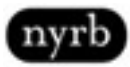
NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



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INTRODUCTION

TOVE JANSSON is a writer of islands.

This sentence is slippery, "of" being the operative word. From the time she was very small, islands were important to Jansson, as her family spent their summers in the stony, windswept Pellinge archipelago in southern Finland. The family belonged to the tiny minority of Swedish-speaking Finns, and both of Jansson's parents were artists, her father a sculptor and her mother an illustrator. All summer, in their happy isolation, the little girl and her brothers swam and fished and ran, did their chores, told stories by firelight, and drew. Throughout her life, she would return again and again to islands as a setting in her work. Her motto became "Work and Love," and she committed to both with a ferocious intensity.

Jansson, bright and precocious, wrote and illustrated her first picture book at age fourteen. Later she attended art academies and started her artistic life as a painter, accepting commissions for large-scale frescoes and exhibiting when she could. To support herself, she took on steady illustration work for magazines and books. During World War II, when she was thirty-one, Jansson began to write and illustrate books for children about the Moomintrolls, a family of plump and kindly beasties, which combined a dark subterranean wit with a strong philosophical bent. Beginning in 1954, the Moomins became a syndicated comic strip and made Jansson rich and internationally famous. They also made her grindingly busy. She began to long for the isolation of her hungry early years, when her art was hers alone and she didn't have to answer the thousands of letters sent every year from her young fans or live under the pressure of producing a weekly comic strip. Soon she built the first of her own series of cabins in the Pellinge islands and escaped for the summer to live among the eider ducks and thunderstorms. Later she brought along her lifelong companion and love, the artist Tuulikki Pietilä. When she found that she could at last leave the Moomin strip to her brother, Jansson returned to painting but found to her dismay that the gatekeepers of fine art had become

wary of welcoming a famous cartoonist back into their ranks.

And so in 1968, when she was fifty-four years old, Jansson began to write books for adults. She found a joy in the demands of this new literary form. In her (to me, perfect) 1972 novel, *The Summer Book*, Jansson writes "An island can be dreadful for someone from outside. Everything is complete, and everyone has his obstinate, sure and self-sufficient place. Within their shores, everything functions according to rituals that are as hard as rock from repetition, and at the same time they amble through their days as whimsically and casually as if the world ended at the horizon." This quote doubles back on itself: It is a lovely description of physical islands, but also as a description of an artist during the steady and happy days of creation. In her very dark novel *The True Deceiver*, Jansson writes of a children's book illustrator: "It was simply that she was only fully alive when she devoted herself to her singular ability to draw, and when she drew she was naturally always alone." An artist is happiest alone in her work, focused, deep in the rituals the work necessitates. When writing, there is nothing beyond the story's own urgent horizons.

Of her fifteen books for adults, Jansson wrote four as original short-story collections. "I love the short story," she wrote in a note in 1990, "concentrated and united around a single idea. There must be nothing unnecessary in it, one must be able to hold the tale enclosed in one's hand" (quoted in Boel Westin's excellent and comprehensive 2014 biography, *Tove Jansson: Life, Art, Words*). Short stories are themselves islands, spare and self-contained. A collection is formed of separate works, whole unto themselves, and yet borne of the same geologic pressures; the book you have in your hands, culled from stories published over the span of five books and twenty-five years, is in many ways an aerial map of Jansson's deepest concerns. Most artists are given a few urgent themes that they will endlessly circle and explore in their lives. From the gull's-eye view of a collection of selected stories, patterns emerge, a larger story is told.

Jansson returned again and again to the themes of painting and drawing, the intensity of close attention, the celebration of visual beauty, the lure of travel, the strange magic that takes place when the natural world meets the human, and, most pervasively, the terror of imminent disaster just out of sight. In

the happy valley where the Moomins live, a flood comes that obscures the earth and sets the Moomin family afloat; a comet nears, threatening all life, and driving even the waters of the ocean away to hide. Likewise, a sense of danger lurks at the edges of most of the stories in *The Woman Who Borrowed Memories*: an old couple painfully survives after an apocalypse ("Shopping"); a winter storm pushes threateningly into the apartment of a woman who is unhappy in love ("The Storm"); an old acquaintance steals a woman's memories until the robber, in effect, ends up appropriating the other woman's life ("The Woman Who Borrowed Memories"). Most of these stories spin around isolates, people who stand sturdily in the center of the tales, watching the way others move in the world around them. The awful child Elis who visits the family on their happy island in the hilarious "The Summer Child" is distanced from humanity by his clear-sighted recognition of all things in the world that are inhumane; Erik in "The Doll's House" is boxed out of his lover's passion for building a dollhouse by an unwelcome interloper; in the story "Letters to Konikova," based on Jansson's own letters to her friend the photographer Eva Konikova who emigrated to America, the narrator is furious at being left behind. Jansson's characters long to connect at the same time that they fight helplessly and fiercely for their autonomy.

Jansson's prose is so clear and her wit so sharp that it would be easy to overlook the terror that is the animating spirit for most of these stories. As the artist in "Black-White" writes, "No one can depict desolation who hasn't inhabited desolation and observed it very closely. Things condemned have a terrible beauty." It is the terrible beauty, this simultaneous dose of horror and splendor, that unites all of the art of Jansson, but particularly this selected edition of her decades of stories. In "The Garden of Eden," kindly Viktoria goes for a walk in the little village in Spain that she's visiting and is depressed to find herself in an awful place, full of stunted olive trees and dirty sheep and plastic bags that trip her, "a kind of rubbish dump, the unavoidable outskirts of any human paradise." Then, in a breath, things change: "the setting sun broke through a gap in the mountain chain and the twilit landscape was instantly transformed and revealed; the trees and the grazing sheep enveloped in a crimson haze, a sudden, beautiful vision of

biblical mystery and power. Viktoria thought she had never seen anything so lovely. She remembered once a set designer saying, 'My job is to paint with light, that's all it is. The right light at the right time.' "

The right light at the right time: One can hear Jansson, the academy-trained painter, here. The darkness is as essential as the joyous and equally perilous light. The light and the dark give each other definition. In "Black-White," an artist pushes the thought a bit further, writing to his wife, "I see my work as pieces of reality or unreality carved at random from a long and ineluctable course of events—the darkness I draw continues on endlessly. I cut across it with narrow and dangerous shafts of light."

There are videos online of Klovharu, the island where Jansson and Pietilä spent their summers into their eighties. The cabin is tiny; it has windows in all four directions so the women could see visitors coming from far off and prepare themselves. Outside, all is rock and wildflower, noisy with the constant waves and screams of the seabirds and high wind. There is no electricity. At night, they had to find their way by the light of kerosene lamps and stars. It is easy to imagine a storm black on the horizon, the breakneck oncoming rush of it. The birds quiet and hide as the darkness comes on. The wind begins to beat on the house, the waves spray the windows and obscure them, the rain crashes on the roof; it is all exhilarating, it feels as if the house will be swept at any moment off the rock and sent sailing into the ocean. Inside, there is a small circle of lamplight, there is work and love. The terror of what's outside makes what's inside warmer, gentler; the light presses bravely against the danger and darkness. We read Tove Jansson to remember that to be human is dangerous, but also breathtaking, beautiful.

—LAUREN GROFF

THE LISTENER

AUNT GERDA was fifty-five when it began, and the first sign of change was in her letters. They grew impersonal.

She was a quiet, well-to-do woman of ordinary appearance. Nothing about her was provocative, disturbing, or exaggerated. But she was a good letter writer. Not brilliant, of course, not amusing, but in her letters Aunt Gerda took up and examined every detail communicated to her without ever subjecting her correspondents to meddlesome advice. They had grown accustomed to the fact that she replied at once, not anxiously but with care and serious interest. Her letters often ended with a wish for a productive autumn or a pleasant spring, and this generous time limit seemed to give them full freedom to take their time with their next letter.

Reading one of Aunt Gerda's letters was exciting, like reliving one's own experiences, only this time dramatized and clarified on a wider stage, with a Greek chorus observing and underlining the action. And with the certain assurance that she would never reveal the confidences with which she was so often rewarded.

Now, and for some time past, Aunt Gerda waited weeks and months with her replies, and when she finally did write, her letters were marred by unworthy excuses, her handwriting had grown large and loose, and she wrote on only one side of the paper. And her masterfully detailed sympathy had lost its warmth.

When a person loses what might be called her essence—the expression of her most beautiful quality—it sometimes happens that the alteration widens and deepens and with frightening speed overwhelms her entire personality. This is what happened to Aunt Gerda. Soon she was dropping names, forgetting birthdays, faces, promises. She began coming late—the woman who always used to sit and wait on the steps and still be the first to arrive. Her tardy presents were too expensive, too big, too impersonal, and accompanied by embarrassing excuses. No longer the lovingly calculated gifts that she had made herself. No

longer the pretty, touching Christmas cards put together from pressed flowers, angels, and occasional glitter. Now she bought expensive, glossy cards with printed wishes for joy and happiness.

As a result, the dispatches Aunt Gerda sent out bore sad witness to her transformation—a vast, depressing lack of attentiveness. People carry their loved ones with them. They are forever present, and life is full of easily grasped opportunities to show them one's affection. It costs so little and achieves so much. Her siblings and nieces and nephews and friends all felt that Gerda had lost her style, her sense of responsibility, that she had grown self-centered from living alone—or perhaps it was the inescapable forgetfulness that comes with age. But deep down they knew that the change was deeper. It was inexplicable and basic and a matter of shifts in the mysterious stratum that forms a person's character and worth.

Aunt Gerda was aware of what was happening to her, but she didn't understand it. The acts and attitudes that had been a voluntary adaptation and concession to her own kindheartedness became very suddenly an overwhelming burden. She was plagued by self-reproach. Time, the passing hours, the need to be punctual was perhaps the most difficult of all. Days with an afternoon or evening invitation had their own timing, capricious and anxious even in the morning. In an odd way, they were bifurcated, so to speak. On the one side was Aunt Gerda's genuine anticipation as she arranged the things she wanted to have with her when she left home. And on the other side was a great uncertainty with regard to names, faces, words, and the grasp of detail and context that must be complete for anyone who loves. On that side, too, was the enemy—time. Time that relentlessly approaches a certain predetermined second at which someone on the other side of a door begins to wait. A second is less than one breath, and everything that follows is too late, more and more too late. When Aunt Gerda approached the appointed time for departure, her unease became unbearable. She made peculiar mistakes, misread the clock, started doing small irrelevant chores. She grew suddenly tired and fell asleep in her chair, and if she'd set the alarm clock, she might go out on the stairs or into the attic for no reason at all just when it rang. When the poor woman finally managed to arrive—too late—she

couldn't keep herself from annoying her host and hostess with desperate and overly detailed excuses.

Time passed and things did not improve. It is difficult when a person one values behaves badly, so much so that no one can rush in and help. In the middle of a sentence, Aunt Gerda would forget whether one of her sister's children was a boy or a girl and stop abruptly in a panic and then say, very softly, "I mean, how is your . . . child?" She introduced herself to people she'd known for years, and her fear was so visible that it cast gloom on everyone she knew.

It is important to describe all this in order to understand Aunt Gerda's behavior in the late winter of nineteen hundred seventy.

Probably few of us pay adequate attention to all the things constantly happening to the people we love, a steady, compact mass of activity that can be grasped in its entirety only by a person like Aunt Gerda—before she changed, of course. Loved ones take exams and degrees or fail to take them; they get raises and grants or fail to get them; they have children and miscarriages and neuroses; they have trouble with the help and their sex lives and teenage rebelliousness and misconceptions and money and maybe their stomachs or their teeth; they lose their faith or their jobs or their self-confidence or the person they're trying to live with and then lose themselves in politics or self-deception or disappointment or ambition; they get disloyalty and funerals and all sorts of frights thrown right in their faces; and eventually they get wrinkles and a thousand other things they hadn't expected—and I had all of that in the palm of my hand, thought Aunt Gerda in distress. It was all as clear as an etching and I made no mistakes! I never made a mistake. What is it that's happened to me?

She often woke at night and was unable to fall back to sleep. Sometimes she wondered where the calm, happy people might be found, if such people even existed, and whether she might dare to let herself be captivated if she ever did find them. No, Aunt Gerda thought. They too carry some secret weight, they too hide some burden that they want to share.

Letters, gifts, and affection's glossy greetings are important. But the ability to listen face-to-face is even more important, a great and rare art. Aunt Gerda had always been a good listener, aided perhaps by her difficulty in expressing herself and by her

lack of curiosity. She had been listening to friends and relatives ever since she was young, listening while they talked about themselves and each other, carrying them with her in a huge, artfully constructed mental map of crisscrossing lives. She listened with her whole large, flat face, unmoving, leaning slightly forward, with downcast eyes, though she would occasionally look up, quickly and in obvious distress. She didn't touch her coffee and let her cigarette burn down. Only in the short pauses that even a tragic tale leaves open for trivial but necessary explanations did she permit herself a lungful of smoke and a deep swallow of coffee before replacing the cup on its saucer carefully and without a sound. In essence, Aunt Gerda was not much more than silence. Afterward, it was difficult to reconstruct what she had said, maybe only a breathless questioning—Yes? Really?—or a quick expression of sympathy.

As the years went by and Aunt Gerda's weight of insight grew, it troubled no one that she knew so much about them. They counted on her protective faculty; they let themselves be misled by her peculiar air of innocence and neutrality. It was like telling secrets to a tree or a devoted pet and never having afterward that queasy feeling that you've given yourself away. But now it was as if Aunt Gerda had lost her innocence. Her broad face listened the same way—open, unfurrowed—and though her brief expostulations were the same, they had lost something of their shyness and the simple desire to know in order to understand and so to love. There was not the same pain in her eyes, and she had developed an annoying, involuntary gesture that was, perhaps, apologetic.

Not many of them called Aunt Gerda that winter and spring. Her apartment grew very quiet and peaceful, she listened only to the elevator or sometimes to the rain. She often sat at her window and watched the change of seasons. She had a bay window in a semicircular projection that was rather chilly. The window was round and now in March embellished with icicles. The spikes of ice were thick and finely chiseled by running water. In the evening, they turned blue. No one called and no one came. It seemed to her the window was a great eye looking out over the city and the harbor and a strip of the gulf under ice. The new silence and emptiness was not entirely a loss, it was something of a relief. Aunt Gerda felt like a balloon, untied, soaring off its own

way. But, she thought, it's a balloon that's bouncing against the ceiling and can't get free.

She understood that this was no way to live, human beings are not built to float. She needed an earthly anchor of meaning and care so she didn't get lost in confusion. One day, with water dripping from the eaves, Aunt Gerda decided to exercise her memory and pull herself back to the simple plane where her life had its justification. She made a list of the devoted people she could remember and of their children and grandchildren and other relatives and made an earnest effort to remember when they were all born. The paper was much too small. Aunt Gerda rolled out a long piece of shelf paper on the dining-room table and held it down with thumbtacks. She made a big black dot, a round head for each of them, with the name and birth date and title in a pretty little oval. She placed their children alongside, connected to their parents with a red line. She put all romantic relationships in pink—double lines for unconventional or forbidden alliances. Aunt Gerda became engrossed. Some heads were burdened with perfect coronas of pink—like galactic suns, impressive and probably regrettable.

For the first time, Aunt Gerda became aware of her own private commentary, which was not entirely benign. She bought crayons in new colors and worked on conscientiously—divorces in violet, hate in crimson, loyalty lines in bright cerulean. The dead were gray. She left space for memory to provide all the facts and data that fill and surround a life. She had time now to remember. Time was no longer a danger, it moved in parallel with herself and later on she would nail it down in a neat little oval. Aunt Gerda noted thefts of money, of children, of work and love and trust. She remembered those who drowned one another in bad conscience or who froze each other out. She drew their lines and erased them to make them more precise. Time was no longer bifurcated, and she listened only to her inner voice. Her memory delivered up tones of voice and silences, faces that clenched and went naked and then closed again, and all the mouths that talked and talked. Aunt Gerda gathered them all and put them to good use. What she wrote in the ovals lost its weight and its pain but retained its meaning. Aunt Gerda's memory opened like a great seashell, every twist was clear and exact and retained its echo. Even very distant echoes came gradually closer,

like whispers.

As the spring wore on, Aunt Gerda transferred her great life map onto better, thicker paper. She was bothered a little by repetitions that might strike some as banal, but all human behavior follows quite primitive rules. And anyway she did have one unique event—an attempted murder. She inscribed it in purple and felt a little cold thrill, maybe not unlike the thrill a stamp collector feels when he fastens a priceless misprint into his collection.

Sometimes Aunt Gerda sat quietly without trying to remember, simply immersed in her solar system of past and emerging lives, sensing the future changes in the lines and ovals, inevitable in the light of obvious cause and effect. She felt a desire to forestall what must happen, to draw her own lines, new lines, maybe in silver and gold since all the other colors were taken. She toyed recklessly with the idea of making the dots and ovals movable, game pieces that could shift their context and create new constellations and entanglements.

Now and then the telephone rang, but Aunt Gerda said she had a cold and couldn't see anyone.

Toward the end of April, Aunt Gerda began to draw a frame around her map, a frame of small, peculiar ornaments, not unlike the distracted figures a person doodles in a telephone directory while listening. She was listening, inwardly, to words in short sentences that summarized what she knew.

Her nephew called and asked if he might drop by, but Aunt Gerda replied that she hadn't the time. The map was approaching its ultimate meaning. It was at a critical stage and would tolerate no interference.

The large planets hold the small ones in place with a firm grip. Satellites follow their predetermined paths. And the strong lines of the dead cross all the others, the double lines, the dotted lines, the coiled lines. Calculation, disappointment, and loss. Aunt Gerda had drawn the beautiful relationships in such light colors that they were hidden by the stronger colors, and perhaps some of them had been erased in the course of her work. Now she drew only words, in short intensive sentences, each of which summarized a truth. Each of them was meant for someone to listen to very carefully. Did you know it was your fault he died? Do you know that you're not the father of your daughter? That

your friend dislikes you? The map immediately needed alteration and Aunt Gerda drew her first line in gold. It was a terrifying and irresistible mental game that she called “the fatal words.” It could only be played in the evening by the window. She realized that such words must be uttered only at long intervals, if they were ever really uttered at all. Eight, nine words were sometimes enough for widespread and lasting alterations to the great map on the dining-room table. And later, when the time was right, new words for a new listener and once again the picture would change. The effects could be estimated and predicted, like when you play chess with yourself. Aunt Gerda remembered some lines of poetry she’d read as a child.

> Frithiof sat with Björn the true
> At the chessboard, fair to view;
> Squares of silver decked the frame,
> Interchanged with squares of gold.

She would draw her lines of silver and gold, then wait, perhaps quite a while, then draw another line. She had time, and the material was inexhaustible.

It was early in May. Far into the bright nights she sat by the window and played her great, dangerous game. She didn’t light the lamps. The nights were luminous—the transparent, lingering blue that comes with spring. She didn’t need to look at the map, she knew it by heart. As she formed and spoke the words, the lines and ovals moved and the colors steadily changed. For the first time in her life, Aunt Gerda had the sweet and bitter experience of power.

When the weather grew warmer, she opened the window, put on her coat, covered her legs with a blanket, and sat in the bay to look out at the city and the strip of open water. Now she could hear footsteps and voices down on the street, every sound clear and distinct. All the passersby seemed to be on their way to the harbor. It seemed to Aunt Gerda that the rooms where she lived no longer enclosed her, they had turned outward and away. The too luminous night was suddenly disquieting and made her sad. She began to think about all the things happening out there right now that she knew nothing about. All the time, every minute, something was happening out there.

Aunt Gerda sat quite still for a long time, then she threw off her blanket and went out into the hall. She called her nephew and asked him if he'd like to come by for a while and talk about his painting, but he was busy and couldn't come. "Painting?" he said. "That was a long time ago, Aunt Gerda. I'm working for Papa now."

She hung up the phone and went into the dining room. Her map was indistinct in the half-light. At the moment, it resembled one of those old representations of the earth seen from the sky, drawn at a time when the known islands were huge but the unknown continents vanishingly small.

Aunt Gerda was a perfectionist. It is possible that she didn't know it or even know that sharp, lovely word. But in her opinion, a thing half done was meaningless. Time had tricked her, dreadful time, which she once again had wasted. Her map was invalid. She rolled it up carefully, fixed it with three rubber bands and wrote, "To be burned unread after my death." It was a beautiful piece of work, Aunt Gerda thought. It would in fact be a shame if none of them looked at it anyway. She put the map on the highest shelf in the hall closet and closed the window. The footsteps and voices on the street disappeared. Then she lit the lamp above the dining-room table and got out her box of shiny pictures and pressed flowers. One by one she lay them on the table and remembered what they looked like. Then with a single motion of her large, clever hand, Aunt Gerda swept all the pretty pictures back into their box. Several specks of glitter had fallen on the rug and glowed there as blue as the night outside.

Translated by Thomas Teal

BLACK-WHITE

Homage to Edward Gorey

HIS WIFE'S name was Stella, and she was an interior designer—Stella, his beautiful star. Sometimes he tried to sketch her face, which was always at rest, open and accessible, but he never succeeded. Her hands were white and strong and she wore no rings. She worked quickly and without hesitation.

They lived in a house that Stella had designed, an enormous openwork of glass and unpainted wood. The heavy planking had been chosen for its unusually attractive grain and fastened with large brass screws. There were no unnecessary objects to hide the structural materials. When dusk entered their rooms, it was met with low, veiled lighting, while the glass walls reflected the night but held it at a distance. They stepped out onto the terrace, and hidden spotlights came on in the bushes. The darkness crept away, and they stood side by side, throwing no shadows, and he thought, This is perfect. Nothing can change.

She never flirted. She looked straight at the person she was speaking to, and when she undressed at night, she did it almost absentmindedly. The house was like her, its eyes were wide open, and sometimes he worried that someone might look in on them from the darkness. But the garden was surrounded by a wall, and the gates were locked.

They often entertained. In the summer, they hung lanterns in the trees and Stella's house resembled an illuminated seashell in the night. Happy people in strong colors moved within this picture in groups or in twos and threes, some of them inside the glass walls and some outside. It was a lovely pageant.

He was an illustrator. He worked mostly for magazines; now and then he did a book jacket.

The only thing that bothered him was a mild but persistent pain in his back, which may have resulted from the excessively low furniture. There was a large black bearskin in front of the fireplace, and sometimes he wanted to lie on it with outstretched arms and legs, bury his face in the fur and roll around like a dog to rest his back. But he never did. The walls were glass, and there

were no doors between the rooms.

The large table by the fireplace was also of glass. He was in the habit of laying out his drawings on it in order to show them to Stella before sending them on to the client. These moments meant a great deal to him.

Stella came and looked at his work. “It’s good,” she said. “Your use of line is perfect. All I’m missing is a dominant element.”

“You mean it’s too gray?” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “It needs more white, more light.”

They stood at the low table and he saw his drawings from a distance. They really were very gray.

“I think what it needs is black,” he said. “But you need to look at them up close.”

Afterward he thought for a long time about black as a focus. He was uneasy, and his back was worse.

The commission came in November. He went in to his wife and said, “Stella, I’ve been given a job that really intrigues me.” He was happy, almost excited. Stella put down her pen and looked at him. She was always able to interrupt her work without annoyance.

“It’s a terror anthology,” he said. “Fifteen stories, with black-and-white illustrations and vignettes. I know I can do it. It suits me. It’s my kind of thing, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely,” said his wife. “Are they in a rush?”

“Rush!” he burst out, and laughed. “This isn’t some two-bit assignment, this is a serious piece of work. Full pages. They’re giving me a couple of months.” He rested his hands on her worktable and leaned forward. “Stella,” he said gravely, “I’m going to use black as a dominant element. I’m going to do darkness. Gray, well, I’ll only use gray when it’s like holding your breath, like when you’re waiting to be afraid.”

She smiled. “It’s so nice you’ve got something you find interesting.”

The text arrived, and he lay down on his bed and read the first three stories, no more. He wanted to begin work believing that the best material would come further on and so retain his expectations as long as possible. The third story gave him an idea, and he sat down at the table and cut himself a piece of thick, chalk-white rag paper with an embossed maker’s mark in the corner.

The house was quiet and they weren't expecting guests.

It had been very hard for him to get used to this paper because he couldn't forget how much it cost. Drawings on less expensive paper tended to be freer and better. But this time it was different. He loved the feel of the pen as it ran across the elegant surface in clean lines and at the same time he relished the barely discernible resistance that brought the lines to life.

It was midday. He closed the drapes, turned on the lamp, and began to work.

They ate dinner together, and he was very quiet. Stella asked no questions. Finally he said, "It's no good. There's too much light."

"But can't you close the drapes?"

"I did," he said. "But somehow it's still too light. It only gets gray, it doesn't get black!" He waited until the cook had finished serving and gone away. "There aren't any doors in this house," he burst out. "I can't close myself in!"

Stella stopped eating and looked at him. "You mean it's just not working," she said.

"No. All I get is gray."

"Then I think you should find another studio," said his wife. They went on eating, the tension gone. Over coffee she said, "My aunt's old house is standing empty. But I think there's still furniture in the little attic apartment. You could give it a try."

She called Jansson and asked him to put a heater in the attic room. Mrs. Jansson promised to leave food on the steps every day and to make sure the room was clean. Otherwise he'd have to keep house for himself and take a hot plate with him. It took only a few minutes to make all the arrangements.

When the bus appeared around the bend in the road, he turned earnestly to his wife. "Stella," he said. "It will only be for a couple of weeks, then I can finish up at home. I'm going to concentrate while I'm there. I won't be writing any letters, just working."

"Of course," said his wife. "Now take care of yourself. And call me from the general store if there's anything you need."

They kissed, and he climbed onto the bus. It was afternoon, and sleeting. Stella didn't wave, but she stood and watched until

the bus was hidden by the trees. Then she closed the gate and walked back up to her house.

He recognized the bus stop and the evergreen hedge, but it had grown higher and grayer. He was also surprised that the hill was so steep. The road went straight up, bordered by a confused mass of withered undergrowth and cut by deep furrows where the rain had washed sand and gravel down the slope. The house clung tightly to the hill at an impossible angle just below the crown, and the house, the fence, the outbuildings, the fir trees, all of them seemed to be holding themselves upright with a terrible effort. He stopped at the steps and looked up at the façade. The house was very tall and narrow, and the windows looked like loopholes. The snow was melting, and in the silence he could hear nothing but water dripping in among the firs. He walked around to the back. At the rear of the house was a one-story kitchen that merged with the hill in a messy, ill-defined rampart of rubbish. Here in the shadow of the firs lay everything the old house had spit out in the course of its life, everything worn out and unnecessary, everything not to be seen. In the darkening winter evening, this landscape was utterly abandoned, a territory that had no meaning for anyone but him. He found it beautiful. Unhurriedly, he went into the house and up to the attic. He closed the door behind him. Jansson had been there with the heater, a glowing red rectangle over by the bed. He walked to the window and looked down the hill. It seemed to him that the house leaned outward, tired of clinging tightly to the slope. With great love and admiration, he thought of his wife, who had made it so easy for him to leave. He felt his darkness drawing closer.

After a long night without dreams, he set to work. He dipped his pen in the India ink and drew calmly—small, tight, skillful lines. But now he knew that gray is only the patient dusk that makes preparation for the night. He could wait. He was no longer working to make a picture but only in order to draw.

In the dusk he walked to the window and saw that the house was leaning outward. He wrote a letter.

Beloved Stella, the first full page is finished and I think it's good. It's warm here and very quiet. The Janssons had cleaned,

and this afternoon they left a canister of food on the steps—lamb wrapped in cabbage, and milk. I make coffee on the hot plate. Don't worry about me, I'm getting along fine. I've been thinking about leaving the margins ragged—maybe I've been too conventional. Anyway, I was right that the dominant needs to be black. Thinking of you, a great deal.

He walked down to the general store and posted the letter after dark. The wind had come up a bit and the fir trees sighed as he walked home. The weather was still warm, snow was melting and running down the hill in furrows of sand and gravel. He had meant to write a longer, different letter.

The days passed quietly, and he worked steadily. The margins had grown fluid, and his pictures began in a vague and shadowy gray that felt its way inward, seeking darkness.

He had read the whole anthology and found it banal. There was only one story that was truly frightening. It placed its terror in full daylight in an ordinary room. But all the others gave him the opportunity to draw night or dusk. His vignettes were workmanlike depictions of the people and places the author and the reader would want to see. But they were uninteresting. Again and again he returned to his dark full pages. His back no longer ached.

It's the unexpressed that interests me, he thought. I've been drawing too explicitly; it's a mistake to clarify everything. He wrote to Stella.

> You know, I begin to think I've been depicting things for much too long. Now I'm trying to do something new that's all my own. It's much more important to suggest than to portray. I see my work as pieces of reality or unreality carved at random from a long and ineluctable course of events—the darkness I draw continues on endlessly. I cut across it with narrow and dangerous shafts of light . . . Stella, I'm not illustrating any longer. I'm making my own pictures, and they follow no text. Some day someone will explain them. Every time I finish a drawing, I go to the window and think about you.
>
> Your loving husband

He walked down to the general store and posted the letter. On his way home he ran into Jansson, who asked if there was a lot of water in the cellar.

"I haven't been in the cellar," he said.

"Maybe you could have a look," Jansson said. "What with all the rain we've had this year."

He unlocked the cellar and turned on the light. The bulb was mirrored in a motionless expanse of water, as shiny and black as oil. The cellar stairs descended into the water and vanished. He stood still and stared. The walls lay in deep shadow, hollowed out where pieces of the wall had collapsed, and the fallen pieces —lumps of stone and cement—lay half hidden under the water like swimming animals. It seemed to him that they swam backward, toward the angle where the cellar hallway turned and went farther in under the house. I must draw this house, he thought. Quickly. I need to hurry, while it lasts.

He drew the cellar. He drew the backyard, a chaos of carelessly discarded fragments, useless, coal black, and entirely anonymous in the snow. It was a picture of quiet, gloomy confusion. He drew the sitting room, he drew the veranda. Never before had he been so fully awake. His sleep was deep and easy, the way it had been as a boy. He woke instantaneously, without that half-conscious, uneasy borderland that breaks up sleep and poisons it. Sometimes he slept during the day and worked at night. He lived in a state of furious expectation. He finished one drawing after another. There were more than fifteen, many times more. He no longer bothered with the vignettes.

Stella, I'm drawing the sitting room. It's such a tired old room, completely empty. I draw nothing but the walls and floor, a worn plush carpet, and a wall panel with a repeating pattern. It's a picture of the footsteps that passed through the room, of the shadows that fell on the wall, of the words that still hang in the air—or maybe of the silence. All of that is still here, you see, and that's what I'm drawing. Every time I finish a drawing, I go to the window and think of you.

Stella, have you ever thought about the way wallpaper loosens and opens? It happens according to strict rules. No one can depict desolation who hasn't inhabited desolation and observed it very closely. Things condemned have a terrible beauty.

Stella, do you know what it feels like to see everything gray

and cautious all your life and to always try to do your best but all you get is tired? And then suddenly you know, you know with absolute certainty. What are you doing right now? Are you working? Are you happy? Are you tired?

Yes, he thought. She's been working and she's a little tired. She's walking around in her house, getting undressed for the night. She's walking around turning off the lights, one by one, she's as white as blank paper, as white as the innocent challenge of the empty surface, and now she alone gives off light, Stella, my star.

He was almost certain that the house leaned outward. Through the window, he could see four steps but not the top one. He put sticks in the snow in order to measure the change in the house's angle of inclination. The water in the cellar did not rise. It didn't matter anyway. He had drawn both the cellar and the façade. He was now working exclusively on the ragged wallpaper in the sitting room. There was no mail. At times he was not certain which letters he had sent to his wife and which he had only imagined. She was farther away now, a picture, a faint pretty picture of a woman. At times, cool and naked, she moved through their large salon of white wood. He found it hard to remember her eyes.

Days and nights and many weeks went by. He worked the whole time. When a drawing was finished, he set it aside and forgot it, continuing at once with a new one, a new white paper, a blank white surface that offered the same challenge, the same limitless possibilities, and an absolute isolation from outside help. Each time he began to draw, he made sure that all the doors in the house were locked. It had begun to rain, but the rain didn't concern him. Nothing concerned him except the tenth story in the anthology. More and more, he thought about this one story, in which the author had subjected daylight to his terror and, against all the rules, enclosed it in an ordinary, pleasant room.

He came closer and closer to the tenth story. It was everywhere, and finally he decided to kill it by drawing. He took a fresh white paper and placed it on the table in front of him. He knew he had to make it visible, the only story in the whole anthology that was genuinely full of horror, and he knew he

could illustrate it only one way—it was Stella's living room, her consummate room, where they lived their lives together. He was amazed but utterly certain. He walked around and lit the low lights, all of them, and the windows opened their eyes out toward the illuminated terrace. Beautiful, strange people moved slowly in groups of two or three, and he drew them all, calmly and surely, with small, gray, skillful lines. He drew the room, a terrifying room without doors, bulging with tension, the white walls shadowed with imperceptibly tiny cracks. He let them run on and widen. He drew them all. He saw that the window-wall's enormous sheet of glass was on the point of bursting from the pressure from within, and he began drawing it as fast as he could, and at the same time he saw the cleft that opened in the floor and it was black. He worked faster and faster, but before his pen could reach the darkness, the room he was drawing turned and crashed outward to its ruin.

Translated by Thomas Teal

THE OTHER

THE FIRST time was in the milk shop as he stood looking at the display of cakes under the glass counter, completely indifferent to the ingratiating pastries but eager to avoid looking at the clerk. Suddenly, and with dreadful clarity, he saw himself. Not in a mirror. He actually stood beside himself for an instant and thought quietly, There stands a skinny, timid, stoop-shouldered fellow buying cheese and milk and a piece of ham. The apparition lasted only for a second.

Afterward he was upset, and on the way home he wondered if he had strained his eyes with the latest lettering—the text was extremely small. He put his food between the windows where it was cold and sat down at his drawing table to finish the commission. He opened his drawing instruments and filled his finest pen with ink. And there it was again, powerfully. With a sharpening of all his senses, he stood beside himself and observed a man drawing tiny, fine, parallel lines, a man he did not like but who aroused his interest. This time, it lasted a little longer, perhaps five seconds.

He felt a slight chill, but his hands weren't shaking, so he finished the job, cleaned it up, and put the sheet in an envelope. The whole time he was writing the address, licking the stamps, closing the metal clasps, he was on the verge of gliding away to stand alongside himself, watching a man prepare a parcel. It was a very close thing. He put on his hat and coat to go to the post office. Down on the street, he started to tremble and clenched his jaws so tightly that they hurt. Nothing happened at the post office. He cashed a money order and bought some stamps. He decided to take a walk along the harbor, although it was raining and quite cold—a calm, purposeful man taking a quick walk to relax and dispel his thoughts. Exhaustion sometimes produces phenomena that can be easily explained. They vanish if you leave them alone and refuse to let yourself be frightened.

He avoided looking at the people he passed. The wind was blowing from the water, and the warehouses along the

waterfront were closed. He walked and walked, trying to occupy his thoughts with something of interest. He could think of nothing but lettering. He tried to capture and hold on to the tiniest scrap of usable thought, but the only thing he really cared about was lettering. In the end, he let his troubled mind rest in a large, quiet surface of letters, a text arrangement of perfect beauty to which the key was distance and balance. That's the way it is with letters—distance and space are what matters. He usually started inking from the bottom up so that he wouldn't be distracted by the meaning of the words.

By the time he reached the promontory, he felt calmer. A very long time ago, when he still suffered from ambition and disappointment, someone had said that he didn't love his letters and that it showed. The remark had hurt and troubled him. He had seen text arrangements that were considered vivid and expressive. They struck him as clumsily done—not even retouched. For him, the stamp of quality was objectivity and purity. Lettering and mathematics have exactly the same potential for perfection. There can be only one right answer.

Now he had the wind at his back. He passed a sign at the ferry and noticed in passing that the letters were awkward and ugly. His attention slid away and a quick stab of anxiety swept over him. He tried to look at boats, joints in the stone pier, iron rings, moorings, anything at all, the way a person entering a strange room searches for conversation pieces among the room's indifferent objects. Finally he tried to think about the daily newspaper, about reports of great and frightening significance, but all he saw was a great blurry text of stocky typefaces, black in the headlines and otherwise completely unreadable. He started to run. It came closer. It came back.

He stopped and took a big step to one side and they walked on together. This time it was very distinct and lasted for maybe a minute. A minute is a long time. He saw his own overcoat flapping about his legs in the wind and caught a glimpse of a pinched profile under his hat, the profile of a gentleman who cared about nothing, a gentleman who was out walking because he didn't want to go home. His interest was mixed with contempt, and he wondered if the man who walked beside him was afraid and if he too felt contempt. He felt warm and vaguely impatient.

The phenomenon ended and all he saw was the wet asphalt. Mechanically, he went on walking. His heart pounded rapidly and hard. No one had ever looked at him that way before, with such interest and intensity. He walked into the park and sat down on a bench as if he were waiting for someone. His heart was still pounding and he didn't dare raise his eyes from the ground. Nothing happened. He waited for a long time and nothing happened. He did not try to understand, he only waited. When it began to rain, he rose in disappointment and went home. It was not yet evening, but he fell asleep at once, hugely tired, and slept straight through to morning.

He woke in an odd mood that he didn't recognize as expectant. He dressed himself with great care, shaved, tidied his room—listening the entire time. It occurred to him that he might be listening for the doorbell or the telephone, so he turned off both. He did not work today. He moved as quietly and slowly as possible, back and forth across the room, and as he moved, he fussed with the small objects set out for use or decoration, moving them about and putting them back, listening uninterruptedly. He took two pretty glasses out of the cupboard and put them back again. The day passed.

It came at dusk, as he looked out the window. Again they stood side by side, utterly still so as not to upset the balance in this remarkable displacement, confusion, or whatever other name might be given to what they were experiencing. He felt the same sympathetic contempt, but a new warmth and quickness pulsed through the sympathy he felt for the person he was visiting. He was strong. A few minutes later, he was alone again, but for those few minutes he had been very happy.

He was alone all that day and all that week. He prepared himself, but nothing happened. Disappointment and anticipation became almost an obsession. He thought about nothing but the opportunity to stand to the side. That's what he called it in his head, standing to the side. He returned to the places where they had been together and waited for a long time. He tried to remember books about doppelgängers and dual personalities but could no longer recall their names, and he didn't want to consult bookstore clerks and librarians. The meeting he was preparing for was extremely personal and secret. It could not be hastened

or explained. All he could do was render himself utterly, impersonally receptive. He knew for certain that he was a receiver—he radiated nothing but expectation. So he waited.

Finally he succeeded. He stepped out of himself without even feeling contempt for the person he'd left. They stood there side by side as they'd done before and gazed out the window. He allowed delight and alertness to wash through him like a warm wave. His hands burned, his totally new hands. The whole time he stared out the window. Then the two of them glided back into each other. This happened with a sense of weary reluctance and left behind it a feeling of disappointment, flaccid and ghastly. He was alone in the room. He ran to the door and back to the window, at his wit's end from abandonment. Again and again he thought, bitterly, He doesn't look at me anymore, why doesn't he look at me? He remembered the story about the doppelgänger who killed himself. He couldn't work.

The rain had stopped, and the weather was chilly and clear. He put on his boots and a warm coat, left the house, and took a bus out to where the city came to an end. Day after day, he wandered around in the borderland where the buildings thin out and lose themselves in arbitrary ugliness. He returned to the area every morning and walked incessantly, occasionally resting on a bench or in some café by a railroad crossing or a factory. The impersonal, undefined environment was perhaps a preparation for his meeting the other, perhaps a challenge. Spring came closer, a work in progress, much like the area he wandered through, as muddy and melancholy in every way. He didn't know what he felt for the one he expected, for the one he made a place for and opened himself up to—at times he was an enemy, at times a friend. In the cafés, he sometimes ordered two cups of coffee, which was also a challenge. Sometimes someone tried to speak to him, more often here than in the city. When that happened, he would immediately stand up and leave.

In these unpopulated, half-built, discarded outlands, he felt he could see the city's discharge, the wave of dirty foam that flows over the rim and settles. Letters and words had also been flushed out; he could see them everywhere in signs, posters, placards. Every fence and wall, even the trees, carried black words that pursued him. But he didn't read them. Chalk and knives and tar had written words that screamed at him and drove him on down

a gauntlet between fences and walls and trees all bearing the impress of the written word. He walked in circles and found distance and space nowhere, balance nowhere. He had begun to think of himself in the third person, "he." He wanders here, waiting, he is waiting for me, walking among these horrible words and these great fields lined with wooden houses and rubbish tips. He walks quickly past the people he encounters and waits only for me to see him and take him under my wing. He passes long murals of barracks and streets and crossroads, again and again, and they are all alike, ceaselessly and sadly repeating, like lost time.

The last snow melted. One day he walked through a thin grove of birches somewhere between two highways, and there, finally, he stood to the side. In a state of great joy, he stood ready to walk on, but now it was not only his hands that felt alive but also his head, his stomach, all of him. His whole body burned with an enormous unused power. Behind the copse of trees by the highway, he could see large black letters. He wanted to read them and understand them, and he started walking, just then I started walking. I wanted to move on, and I started to walk, faster and faster, I hadn't known I could feel like this. I was mad with joy and impatience and I knew there wasn't much time and there was too much to do. I looked back one single time, and there he came, running, stumbling across the marshy ground, stoop-shouldered, his mouth agape as if he were calling to me to wait. I had no time for him, because he was only one person but I was seeing him. I did not reach out to him, I'm sure I didn't, but he threw himself forward toward my hand and grabbed it, and before I had time to despise him it was too late—we were just one person, a single figure standing stock-still beneath the birches, waiting.

Translated by Thomas Teal

THE STORM

SHE WAS awakened by a banging ventilator and lay still and listened, noticing how the storm altered the light patterns on the ceiling. The shadow of the water pipes was an unchanging cross above the head of the bed, but again and again new reflections of swaying streetlights swept across the ceiling, and sometimes the lights of cars, though there weren't many of those at this time of night. The skylight had been covered with snow for several weeks, and for several weeks he hadn't called. That meant he would never call again. Now the door to the washroom started to bang, and she got up to close it. Without turning on the light, she walked into the front room facing the street.

The wind came in gusts and swept snow across the windows in hard, hissing blows, but it wasn't snowing. Above and beyond the storm she heard a heavy, hammering noise that she couldn't figure out. Occasionally it stopped and then resumed. Maybe roof tiles, maybe something else. The night was restless and strange, and so was the room where she listened and waited, all of it submerged in the dark, greenish radiance that surrounds a diver in the ocean. She watched as the wind-sculpted drifts on the rooftops swirled upward like smoke. The snow and the sky above the city shared the same dark light. Something is going to happen, she thought, they've been talking about it on the radio all day. Let it come. I'm so sick and tired of being sick and tired and just waiting, and most of all I'm sick and tired of myself.

There was a light in the same two windows at the hospital, the ones always lit at four in the morning. The Christmas trees at the filling station were lit, but they were shaking their branches in the storm as if terrified and trying to tear themselves free. She stared at them for a long time, and when they finally blew down, at almost the same moment, and were swept across the street, their lights winking out, she cried out in relief. It was cold in the room, which faced the full force of the storm. It no longer came in gusts. Now the wind pressed in on the city from the sea in a single continuous roar, a rising and implacable mass of sound.

Power, she thought, how I love power! The onslaught was so violent that she stepped back from the window. What a storm! What a night!

What is night? Sleeping till the next day; trying to sleep away your tiredness so you can face what you don't want to face; hiding yourself in a cautious little death for which you're not to blame—for hours that seem like seconds when you wake up. She walked back and forth between the windows and thought, Call! Call me and ask me if I'm frightened. She watched the storm tear the snowdrifts on the street into spirals and press the snow against the façades of the buildings like great outstretched hands. The greenish light had grown darker. And dreams, what are they? They dig up your fear and display it, enlarged by cruelty. There is no rest, there is no comfort!

A large object flew past her window and struck the side of the building with a crunch, then flew on—wherever, whatever. The wind was like a great groaning, a scream. Neon lights burned here and there across the city like colored inscriptions in stone, worn almost away, and the snow rose up from the ground everywhere and from all the streets like an enormous curtain. She could no longer see any lights at all, and there was nothing she could do but listen and wait. So it goes, she thought. Thus it will be one day when everything cracks and falls and there is nothing more to remember and hold fast to, and we will have to rethink everything from top to bottom, if we have time. It won't matter if we're strong or weak, and nothing will make an impression on anyone. Everything will be erased and extinguished.

The city was empty, no people and no cars. The temperature had fallen. Her window was a whirling greenish wall of snow, and she stepped back slowly into the room. The storm had gone beyond reason and imagination, merely a powerful, uninterrupted shuddering. This shuddering was universal—in the windowpanes and the walls that protected her, in the air around her and in her teeth and her gut. She moved farther back, against the wall. Right now, she thought, right now I can see that everything is utterly simple. I know what I want. Everyone is standing like this in their rooms tonight. They've woken, all of them, and don't dare go near their windows and don't dare go back to bed. They realize that it's not merely a question of living

and enduring but rather of something else entirely, but they don't know what.

How can a storm of tropical strength find its way to a land of snow, a dreary, dependable land where we light Christmas trees to appease the darkness? Windowpanes shattered in well-built stone houses over the few short hours of the visitation, and sheet-metal roofs were carried away in several areas near the harbor. The storm flew into her violently opened room in an explosion of ice-cold air that was thicker than flesh. It pressed her against the wall and pressed against her eyes and eardrums and into her mouth, while all around her the room fell to pieces like the wings on a dragonfly. No truths applied and nothing had a name that could be used and recognized. She crept toward her bedroom on hands and knees. The only thing that mattered was getting to her bed—her bed by the wall below the water pipes—and hiding in it. She felt the doorjamb with her hands. The floor was covered with snow and shards of glass, and when the storm let go of her, she fell headlong and felt as if she'd broken. She crept on, reached the bed, and crept in under the covers and drew them around her, tight against the wall with her knees drawn up to her chest. Now she heard the storm again and noticed she was cold and realized that something important had happened to her, something that had seemed significant and simple. But she couldn't remember what it was.

The telephone rang for a long time before she realized what it was and lifted the receiver in the dark.

"It's me," she said. "No, I wasn't asleep." She listened attentively, staring at the ceiling, which was no longer a ceiling. The window frames had become a black and arbitrary geometry. She lay beneath a grillwork of broken beams, and above them was a firmament of dark light that rose higher and higher in unbroken eddies of snow. "Don't explain," she said. "Don't say the same thing over and over again, it doesn't matter." She straightened her body in the bed. Slowly, disdainfully, she stretched out her legs and thought, It's not a bit hard to be strong. "It doesn't matter," she said again. "If you've had an insight and then lost it, don't worry about it. You'll remember it in the morning." She put her arm under her head and turned on her side. "Yes," she said. "Yes, of course I'm frightened. Do that. Call me in the morning." They said good night. She hung up the

phone and fell asleep.

About seven o'clock the wind died and the snow drifted down over the city, onto streets and roofs and down over her bedroom, which was completely white and very beautiful when she awoke.

Translated by Thomas Teal

THE WOLF

THERE had been silence for far too long. She gathered herself for a comment, a polite show of interest that might save them for several more minutes. She turned to her guests and asked in English if Mr. Shimomura wrote for children too. The interpreter listened earnestly, made a slight bow, which Mr. Shimomura repeated. They spoke together softly, quickly, almost whispering, hardly moving their lips. She looked at their hands, which were very small with narrow, light brown fingers—tiny, beautiful paws. She felt like a large horse.

"We are sorry," said the interpreter, also in English. "Mr. Shimomura does not write. He never writes. No, no." He smiled. They both smiled. He bowed his head gently and apologetically and gazed at her steadily. His eyes were absolutely black.

"Mr. Shimomura draws," the interpreter added. "Mr. Shimomura would like to see some dangerous animals. Very savage, if you please."

"I understand," she said. "Animal drawings for children. But we don't have many dangerous animals. And those we have live farther north."

The interpreter nodded, smiling. "Yes, yes," he said. "That is very amiable. Mr. Shimomura is pleased."

"We have bears," she said uncertainly, and suddenly couldn't remember the English word for wolf. "Like dogs," she went on. "Large and gray, in the north."

They looked at her attentively and waited. She tried to howl like a wolf. Her guests smiled politely and continued staring at her.

"There are no dangerous animals in the south," she repeated sullenly. "Only in the north."

"Yes, yes," the interpreter said. They were whispering again. Suddenly she said, "Snakes. We have snakes." Now she was tired. She raised her voice and said "Snake" one more time, made a creeping, wavy gesture with one hand and hissed.

Mr. Shimomura was no longer smiling. He laughed,

soundlessly, his head thrown back. “Anaconda,” he said. “Schlange. Very good.” Then turned off the laugh abruptly. The overweight cat jumped down from its chair and walked out into the middle of the floor.

“I,” she said, with some growing panic, “I am quite old, and I don’t actually know much about either children or animals.”

Perhaps she could have asked or felt her way toward the world where he sought and drew his animals. Perhaps she might have discovered something new and important. It was even possible that they were looking for roughly the same thing—the dark, the wild, the shy, and the lost security of being little. She couldn’t know. She lifted the coffee pot and said, “Please?”

The two of them gave a little dancing bow, rising halfway to their feet in a consummate gesture of grateful refusal.

The interpreter said, “Mr. Shimomura thinks that you write beautifully. He has a present for you.”

She undid the silk ribbons. Beneath several layers of brittle rice paper lay a thin wooden box that had been pieced together with the utmost precision. Inside was a fan with a painted picture of a foot-stamping warrior showing his teeth.

“How beautiful!” she said. “Tack. Thank you ever so much, you shouldn’t have! I have always admired these paintings that . . . And the box is exquisite . . .”

“She likes the box,” the interpreter said.

Mr. Shimomura bowed deeply. She used the fan to fan the cat, which laid back its ears and went its way.

“Fat cat,” said Mr. Shimomura in his own English and laughed benevolently.

“Yes,” she said. “Very fat.”

The interpreter stood up and said, “This has been very interesting. Now Mr. Shimomura would like to see savage animals. Please. We depend on your kindness.”

He opened the door for her and they walked into the chilly silence, past a row of tall brown cabinets with glass doors. A threadbare fox contemplated the ceiling from the top of one cabinet.

“Savage?” said Mr. Shimomura.

“No,” she said.

Mr. Shimomura gazed at the fox for a long time. He was very

serious. A man in a white coat came hurrying down the corridor. She stepped in his path and said, “excuse me, but I’ve a foreign gentleman here who’s interested in animals . . .”

He stopped and looked at the floor and said, “I see. Animals. And how can I . . . ?”

“Dangerous native animals,” she explained. “Is there any chance . . . ?”

“I’m in entomology,” he said.

“Of course!” she said. “How silly of me. Bugs are far too small.”

He looked at her. “That depends,” he said. “Of course I don’t know what you’re after . . .”

“No,” she said quickly. “In this case we need something completely different.” She smiled and bowed slightly and the man in the white coat continued down the corridor. Mr. Shimomura had opened his sketch pad and was studying the fox with his little black eyes wide open. His profile was spare, not sculptural, only a severely drawn line, his nose hardly more than a muzzle. Only his hair spilled out in vital, almost violent profusion, like coarse, black grass. He turned to her and said, “No, no.” He closed his sketchbook and waited.

They walked up the curved stairway, floor after floor, and into the uppermost hall, which was full of skeletons. Some of them were huge and hung from the ceiling. They were equipped with black teeth and terrible, gaping jaws. Above her was the skeleton of an elephant. Without its trunk and its tusks, it had a resigned, all too human face.

“No,” said Mr. Shimomura.

“Yes! No!” she shouted. “I’m so sorry . . .” She walked up to a glass case containing a large, bright yellow crab, put on her glasses, and read aloud to hide her confusion and the silence between them. “‘Japanese Giant Spider Crab, *Macrocheira kaempferi*. Normal habitat: water deep enough that wave action will not hamper its movements.’ You see?” she said. “Japanese.”

He smiled and bowed. They went back down the stairs. Deep, she thought. Deep enough that it doesn’t feel the waves. It just walks along with its ten long legs and nothing gets in its way because it’s so enormously huge.

On the next floor down they saw hundreds of animals that infinite patience and great artistry had captured in characteristic

poses. They had the lassitude of death in their pelts and plaster in their jaws, but they strode across moss or sand or rock in the manner of their species, and not a single one of them was a dangerous animal.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"Please," Mr. Shimomura reassured her. For one moment his hand touched her arm. In a lovely gesture, his hands expressed the misfortune that cannot be remedied, not even with amiability. They walked on.

And then they came to the wolf.

It was as moth-eaten as the fox, but it looked angrier. Mr. Shimomura opened his sketchbook and she stood behind a pillar so as not to disturb him.

They were alone. The great hall was filled with an even, white light from the snow outside. There didn't seem to be any bears, only a lot of roundish seals with cotton in their eyes and, farther along, in glass cases, petrified shadows with long, thin legs—probably deer. He doesn't like stuffed animals, she thought. And he's leaving tomorrow. If only my knees weren't so stiff today.

Now Mr. Shimomura was standing beside her. He moved as quietly as he spoke. With a regretful gesture, he handed her his sketch pad. He had drawn the wolf with only a few lines—deliberate, brutal, tremendously sensitive lines. It was a very good drawing. Suddenly she wanted to show him a living wolf.

They waited for the ferry. She had been very anxious about the silence, but Mr. Shimomura didn't seem to care about her any longer. He walked around on the little strip of beach below the dock, picking up small stones and bits of charcoal and studying them closely. He must be freezing in that thin little coat, she thought. And no hat. His drawing of the wolf had given her a timid respect for him, more than what one feels for everything foreign. Her insecurity was also somewhat dampened by her concern that he wasn't warm enough.

A small motor launch with a cabin drew up to the dock. It was called the *Högholmen*.

"Doesn't the ferry run anymore?" she said.

"Only the staff boat," the driver said. "And we only go three times a day."

She turned to Mr. Shimomura and said, "Please." They climbed

down into the motor launch.

"This man is a foreigner," the driver said. "We only take staff. It's closed in the winter."

She was suddenly upset at the thought that Mr. Shimomura wouldn't get to see his wolf. "But he's leaving tomorrow. You see, he's going to Japan tomorrow and then it will be too late. This is very important to him!"

"Fine, fine," the driver said. "But I don't have any tickets." He went into the cabin.

They were the only passengers. The launch drove them out to the island, which stood tall in the water, black and white with rock and snow. She tried to remember where the cages were, but it had been a long time. She remembered a llama that had spit on her, and that she liked the monkeys because they didn't appear to be caged.

Mr. Shimomura said nothing until they had gone ashore. Then he ignited his smile again, stepped aside to make space for her, and said, "Please, please." He waited for her to show him the savage animals.

She went first, up onto the island. The snow was deep and wet and there weren't many paths. They passed locked buildings and empty cages. Almost all the signs had been removed.

In the middle of the island she got her bearings. Here was the old-fashioned pavilion with fretwork gables and an intricate pattern of very small windowpanes. It was here one drank lemonade and listened to the orchestra. Through the window she could see a sea of chairs turned upside down. The snow lay untouched on the steps. Naturally there was no place to have a cup of coffee at this time of year, and no bench to rest your legs on and nowhere to get warm. She was suddenly annoyed and turned abruptly and walked toward the birdcages where the birds sat at the tops of their trees like dark fruit. And the bears are no doubt hibernating, she thought. And it will be several hours before we can go home.

Mr. Shimomura followed her footsteps in the snow. His feet were much smaller than hers. Immobile flocks of goats observed them as they walked across the island. The animals didn't turn their heads to watch them, they moved their whole bodies, all of them at the same time, with great precision, and then the forest of thick, twisted horns was absolutely motionless again. The

whole area lay in silence, not a soul moved among the cages. Melting snow dropped and streamed around them. She stopped and read a sign that said, “The wild ass that came from Rostock on April 5, 1970, shares its pen with kaisa (gray), an elderly domesticated ass.” It struck her as peculiar, especially since there were no asses at all in the enclosure. She wondered where the polar bears lived.

They came down toward the shore in an area called Feline Valley. The snow leopard looked past her, uninterested. It was grayish yellow and had a very long tail. She turned around to check on Mr. Shimomura, and saw that he had gone straight down to the water’s edge. He was not interested in cats. She caught a glimpse of his black coat among the birch trees, moving quickly. Now he was into the yellow reeds. Maybe he’s on a private errand, she thought, and looked at the snow leopard again. After a bit, she moved slowly on, stopping occasionally to wait, but Mr. Shimomura did not come back. So she made her way laboriously down the bank to the shore. She didn’t dare shout. The island was quiet, and maybe all the animals would start howling at once, and anyway she had no right to be there.

Mr. Shimomura was walking along the water’s edge, through the harbor’s deposits of plastic and paper and fruit peels. He was collecting bits of wood that the waves had washed ashore. Of course, she thought, with the relief that comes with recognition, he’s collecting oddly shaped twigs. I’ve read that they do that.

They hadn’t spoken for a long time. They were taking a break. He didn’t show her his twigs, and she didn’t comment. Their solitary wanderings through a closed landscape had simplified something. By and by they walked back to the empty cages.

And now the bears came. She glanced quickly at Mr. Shimomura. Yes, now he was interested. Not in the brown bears but in the polar bear. It lay on its back with its paws in the air, large and shapeless and dirty yellow against the snow. Its muzzle and eyes were coal black. It looked at Mr. Shimomura over its shoulder, raised itself heavily, with the same motions as a sleepy person getting out of bed, and sat down, staring at the snow between its paws. Mr. Shimomura did not take out his sketch pad. He just looked at the bear.

The damp chill was beginning to creep up her legs. This island was really dreadful, unspeakably sad. It cut her off from

everything real and alive. It scared her. Why wasn't he drawing. Was he waiting for the bear to get up? She said nothing, just tied her scarf around her head and hat and waited

Finally Mr. Shimomura turned to her, and, with a bow and a smile, let her know that now he had finished seeing the bear. They passed a bison ox and a mink. Behind one of the buildings there were buckets, shovels, and a pair of skis in the trampled snow. There were people who lived and worked out here. But they never saw a soul.

When she finally found the wolves, the island had darkened in the early dusk.

"Mr. Shimomura," she said slowly. She smiled, almost shyly. And showed him the wolves. There were three big cages, with a wolf in each cage. All three walked back and forth along the bars, back and forth in a kind of gliding trot, without lifting their heads. Mr. Shimomura went closer and gazed at them.

The wolves' ceaseless pacing struck her as appalling. It was timeless. They loped back and forth behind their bars week after week and year after year, and if they hate us, she thought, it must be a gigantic hate! She felt cold, suddenly terribly cold, and she started to cry. Her legs hurt, and she wanted to go home. The wolves and Mr. Shimomura had simply nothing whatever to do with her.

It was not certain how long Mr. Shimomura studied the wolves, but when he walked away the dusk had grown much deeper. She wiped her face with a glove and followed. As they passed the empty monkey house, he turned around and explained everything by laying his hand on his sketchbook, smiling, and nodding his head. He pointed to his forehead to indicate that he had captured the wolf. He had it. She needn't be the least uneasy.

They walked on up the hill. She followed after him in the resigned, irresponsible calm that follows tears, just walked through the snow and felt that now nothing more could be expected of her.

The outlook tower was locked, but there was a round, open veranda at the bottom, its walls covered with names in pencil and ink. Mr. Shimomura brushed snow from the bench and sat down. He put the oddly shaped twigs beside him and sank into immobility. It was now clearly evening. The island below them was dark, but more and more lights were coming on along the

half circle of the horizon, and she could hear the city's continuous dull roar and an ambulance siren that grew steadily fainter and then vanished. Maybe lions don't roar in the winter, she thought. They're sitting there somewhere in one of those windowless buildings that maintain the proper temperature. Maybe all the animals are quiet in winter if they live in cages. Her thoughts grew vague. They lingered for a moment on the Japanese giant spider crab that lives so far down on the bottom of the sea that its ten legs aren't bothered by the waves, and then she drifted into sleep.

She was awakened by Mr. Shimomura touching her hand. It was time to go. She was very cold. They walked down the hill and past the pavilion. She didn't look at the cages and didn't try to say anything in English. After all, he had his wolf. One day, God knew in what remarkable place, Mr. Shimomura would sit down and, with a few obvious, long-considered lines, he would draw a wolf, brutally, sensitively, the most living, breathing wolf that had ever been drawn.

The little motor launch was there to receive them. The driver said nothing.

The only thing I'd like to know, she thought, is which wolf he'll draw. The one he saw or the one he imagines.

Translated by Thomas Teal

THE SQUIRREL

ON A WINDLESS day in November, shortly after sunrise, she saw a squirrel on the boat beach. It sat motionless near the water, hardly visible in the half-light, but she knew it was a living squirrel, and she hadn't seen anything alive for a very long time. The gulls didn't count, they were always flying away. They were like the wind across the waves and the grass.

She put her coat on over her nightshirt and sat down at the window. It was cold, and in the square room with its four windows, the cold stood still. The squirrel didn't move. She tried to remember everything she knew about squirrels. They sail from island to island on bits of lumber, with the wind at their backs. And then the wind dies, she thought, a bit sadistically. The wind dies, or it turns, and they drift out to sea, and it doesn't turn out the way they'd imagined, not one bit. Why do squirrels go sailing? Are they curious or just hungry? Are they brave? No. Just plain stupid. She stood up and went for the binoculars. When she moved, the cold crept in under her coat. It was hard to get the binoculars focused properly, so she put them on the windowsill and went on waiting. The squirrel was still sitting on the boat beach doing nothing, just sitting. She stared at it intently. She found a comb in the pocket of her coat and combed her hair slowly while she waited.

Suddenly it ran up the granite slope, very quickly, scampered up toward the cabin and suddenly stopped. She watched the animal, intensely, critically. The squirrel sat upright, its paws hanging. Now and then its body twitched nervously, an unplanned movement, a kind of crawling hop. It scurried behind the corner of the cottage. So she went to the next window, the one to the east, then on to the south. The rock face was empty. But she knew the squirrel was still there. There were no trees and no bushes, so she'd be able to survey the island from shore to shore. She could see everything that came and everything that went. Unhurriedly, she went to the stove to start the fire.

First, two lengths of scrap lumber at an angle. Above them,

crisscrossed bits of kindling; between them, birch bark; finally, larger pieces of wood that would burn for a long time. When the fire got going, she started to get dressed, slowly and methodically.

She always got dressed as the sun came up, warmly and with foresight. Carefully, she buttoned her shirts and sweaters and her moleskin pants around her broad waist, and when she'd got her boots on and pulled down the earflaps, she liked to sit down in front of the stove in unapproachable contentment, without moving, without thinking, and let the fire warm her knees. She met each new day the same way. She waited grimly for winter.

Autumn by the sea was not the autumn she had imagined. There were no storms. The island withered quietly. The grass rotted in the rain, the granite grew slippery and was covered with dark algae well above the high-water mark, and November progressed in shades of gray. Nothing had happened until the squirrel came ashore. She went to the mirror over the bureau and looked at herself. Her upper lip had a fine grillwork of small, vertical wrinkles that she hadn't noticed before. Her face was an indefinable grayish brown, like the ground outside. Squirrels also turn grayish brown in winter, but they don't lose their color, they simply acquire a new one. She put coffee on the fire and said, "In any case, they're not artistic." The thought amused her.

Now she mustn't act hastily. The animal needed to get used to the island and above all to the cottage, needed to realize that the cottage was nothing more than an immobile gray object. But a house, a room with four windows, is not immobile. The person moving around inside stands out in sharp and threatening silhouette. How does a squirrel perceive movement in a room? How is anyone supposed to interpret movement in an empty room? The only possibility was to move very slowly, without making a sound. Living an utterly silent life was tempting, especially doing it voluntarily and not just because the island was so quiet.

On the table lay neat stacks of white paper. They always lay that way, with pencils alongside. Pages she'd written on were always turned facedown. If words lie facedown, they can change during the night. You see them afresh, quickly, maybe with sudden insight. It's possible.

It was possible that the squirrel would stay overnight. There

was a chance it would stay over the winter.

She walked very quietly across the floor to the cupboard in the corner and opened the doors. The sea was motionless today, everything was motionless. She stood still and held the cupboard doors while she thought about what she had come to get. And as usual she had to go back to the stove in order to remember. It was the sugar. And then she remembered that it wasn't the sugar at all any longer, because sugar made her fat. These delayed recollections were depressing. She let go and allowed her thoughts to wander, and sugar led on to dogs, and she thought about what if it had been a dog that had come ashore on the boat beach, but she dismissed the thought and turned it off. It was a thought that diminished the importance of the squirrel.

She started sweeping the floor, thoroughly and calmly. She liked sweeping. It was a peaceful day, a day without dialogue. There was nothing to defend or censure, everything was turned off, all the words that could have been other words or merely disowned, words that could easily have led to big changes. Now there was only a warm cottage full of morning light, full of herself, sweeping, and of the friendly noise of coffee starting to simmer. The room with its four windows was its own self-evident justification. It was safe. It was in no way the sort of place where people are closed in or left out. She drank her coffee and thought of nothing at all. She rested.

One tiny thought drifted by: What a fuss for a squirrel. There are millions of them; they're not especially interesting. One of them, one specimen, has by chance come here. I need to take care. I'm exaggerating everything at the moment, maybe I've been alone too long. But it was just a passing thought, a commonsense observation that anyone might have made. She put down her cup. Three gulls were sitting out on the point, all of them facing the same way. Now she was feeling a little sick again. It was too hot in front of the stove, and she felt ill after her morning coffee. She needed her little glass of Madeira, it was the only thing that helped.

This is the way a day begins—build the fire, get dressed, sit in front of the fire. Sweep the floor, coffee, morning Madeira, wind the clock, brush teeth, see to the boat, check sea level. Chop wood, workday Madeira. Then comes the whole day. Only at sunset do the rituals resume: sunset Madeira, lower flag, bring in

chamber pot, empty slops, light lamp, supper. Then the whole evening. Every day gets written up before it gets dark, along with the water level, wind direction, and temperature. List by the doorjamb of what she needed from town—batteries, socks that don't itch, all sorts of vegetables, Mobilat ointment, extra lamp chimney, saw blade, Madeira, shear pins.

She went to the closet to get her morning medicine. The Madeira was farthest in to get the chill from the porch. She liked it cold. A bottle needs to have its appointed place. The cellar stairs under the floor were too steep and difficult, and it seemed cowardly to keep bottles hidden outside the house. There weren't many bottles left. Sherry didn't count. It made you sad and wasn't good for the stomach.

The morning light had grown stronger; there was still no wind. She ought to go in and take the bus to town to get more Madeira. Not yet but soon, before it got too cold. The motor was acting up. She ought to try and fix it, but it wasn't the spark plug this time. The only two things she understood about the motor were the spark plug and the shear pin. Sometimes she emptied out the gasoline and strained it through gauze. She'd stood the motor against the wall of the cottage and slipped a plastic bag over the top. It stood there now. Of course she could row. But the boat was heavy and wanted to head into the wind. It was too far. It was all too bothersome. She turned it off.

She opened the screw top noiselessly, held the bottle between her knees, and pressed the top against the flat of her hand while she twisted the bottle, coughed just as the metal band broke, poured herself a glass of Madeira with the bottle at just the right angle—and remembered that this was all unnecessary. Anyway, this was her morning Madeira, which she had a right to because she felt a little ill.

She carried the glass into the main room and put it on the table. The wine had a deep red color against the light from the window. When the glass was empty, she hid it behind the tea canister. She went to the window and looked for the squirrel. Very quietly, she went from window to window, waiting for it to appear. She was warm from the wine, the fire burned in the stove, she turned and went counterclockwise instead of clockwise. She was very calm. There was still no wind, and the sea merged with the sky in a gray nothingness, but the granite

was black from last night's rain.

Then she saw the squirrel. It came as a reward because she was calm and had managed to turn everything off. The little animal scampered across the rock in soft, S-shaped curves, right across the island and down to the water. Now it was back on the boat beach. It's going away, she thought. There's no place to live out here, nothing to eat, no other squirrels, storms come and then it's too late. Carefully, she got down on her knees and pulled the bread box out from under the bed. Like ship's rats, animals know when it's time to leave. They swim or they sail but one way or another they get away from what is doomed. She crawled across the granite, moving as cautiously as she could, breaking off small bits of the hard bread and putting them in crevices in the granite. Now it had seen her and ran all the way down to the water's edge and sat motionless. She saw it only as a smudge, a silhouette, but its contours expressed alertness and distrust. Now it will leave, now it's afraid! She broke the bread as quickly as she could, faster and faster, crushing it with her fists and knees and throwing bits across the ground. She scurried into the cottage on all fours and over to the window. The boat beach was empty. She waited an hour, going from window to window. The ocean was streaked with squall stripes. It was hard to see if anything out there was moving — something floating, an animal swimming. Only the birds rested on the water, white specks that then flew up and glided out over the point. The breeze marks thickened and she could see nothing at all; her eyes were tired and started to tear. She was sick of the squirrel and of herself. She was behaving like a fool.

It was time for her workday Madeira. Brushing her teeth would have to wait. So would chopping firewood and checking the sea level, all of it. She needed to watch out she didn't get too obsessive. She got her glass, filled it quickly and carelessly, and when it was empty she put it on the table and stood still and listened. The silence had changed. There was a light wind, a steady easterly breeze. The room had lost its morning light, the glow of expectation and potential. The daylight was now gray, and the new day was already used, a little soiled by mistaken thoughts and makeshift undertakings. Everything to do with the squirrel seemed unpleasant and embarrassing. She turned it off.

She stood in the middle of the room and felt the warmth of the

workday Madeira and thought, This lasts only a little while. It will pass, quickly, I have to use it or renew it. All the pots and pans in a row over the stove, all the books side by side on their shelves, and on the wall her nautical instruments—those alien, decorative objects that perhaps you needed when you lived on a winter sea. But there were never any storms. If there were, she could write to someone: We're up to Beaufort eight. I'm working. The salmon floats are banging against the wall outside, and the windows are covered with foam from the waves . . . No. Blinded by salt water. Fogged with . . . struck blind. Spume from the breakers dashes across . . . Dear Mister K. The storm has reached Beaufort eight . . .

There were no storms. It just blew, nastily, stubbornly, or else there was a shiny, swollen sea that licked and nibbled at the shore. If the wind did rise, she'd have to see to the boat. When you've seen to the boat, you can have a Madeira that doesn't count.

Now the squirrel came back. A light rustling, a clattering along the cottage wall, paws scraping on the windowpane, and she saw the animal's alert little face, stupid little twitchings around its nose, eyes like glass marbles. Only for an instant, very close, and then the window was empty again. She started to laugh. Well, so you're still here, you little devil . . .

Now she needed wind, any wind at all, as long as it blew from the mainland and the large islands. She tapped the barometer and tried to see if it was falling. Her glasses weren't in any of the usual places, they never were, but as usual it seemed to read Change. She had to hear the weather, the weather report, and then she remembered that the batteries for the radio were dead. It didn't matter, in fact not a bit, the squirrel had stayed. She went to the list by the doorjamb and wrote, Squirrel food. What did they eat? Oatmeal? Macaroni? Beans? She could cook some oatmeal. They'd adapt to each other. But she wasn't going to tame it, absolutely not too tame. She would never try to get it to eat from her hand, come into the cottage, come when she called. The squirrel was not to be a pet, a responsibility, a conscience, it needed to stay wild. They would live their separate lives and just observe each other, in mutual recognition and tolerance. They would respect each other but otherwise continue doing their own thing in complete freedom and independence.

She didn't care about a dog anymore. Dogs are dangerous, they react to everything immediately, they're distinctly sympathetic animals. A squirrel was better.

They made ready to winter on the island. They grew accustomed to each other and developed common habits. After her morning coffee, she put bread out on the granite slope and then sat at her window and watched the squirrel eat. She had figured out that the animal couldn't see her through the windowpane and that it was probably not specially intelligent, but she still moved slowly and had grown used to sitting still for long periods, for hours, while she observed the squirrel's movements without thinking about much of anything. Sometimes she talked to the squirrel but never if it was within earshot. She wrote about it, speculations and observations, and drew parallels between the two of them. Sometimes she wrote insulting things about the squirrel, shameless accusations that she later regretted and scratched out.

The weather was unsettled and grew steadily colder. Every day, right after measuring the water level, she walked up the rock slope to the great pile of driftwood and lumber scraps to chop wood. She'd select a few planks or the end of a log, then saw and chop them into firewood, diligently and rather skillfully. As she worked, she felt as strong and sure as she did sitting in front of the fire at sunrise, fully dressed, immovable as a monument, without thought. When the firewood had been chopped , she carried it down to the cottage and arranged it under the stove, carefully, each chunk, each bit of lumber—triangular, square, broad, narrow, rectangles, and semicircles—all tight and pretty, a jigsaw puzzle, a perfect mosaic. She had gathered the great pile of winter firewood herself.

The wind shifted constantly, and the boat lines had to be restretched and remoored. She woke up at night and lay in bed listening, worrying about the boat. She thought she heard it banging against the rock. Finally she pulled it up on land. But she woke anyway and lay in bed thinking about high water and storms. The boat needed to be pulled up higher, on trolleys. So one morning she went to the woodpile and picked out a couple of smooth old channel markers to use as rollers. She grabbed one of them and pulled. A log fell down on the far side of the pile and there was a quick, animal movement—something darted out

and disappeared in headlong fear. She let go of the channel marker and stepped back. Of course it was here that it lived. It had made a nest for itself, and now the nest was destroyed. But I didn't know, she defended herself. How could I know?

She let the channel marker lie and ran back to the house for some excelsior, ripped open the trapdoor to the cellar, remembered the flashlight only when she was down in the dark —she was always forgetting the flashlight. Jars, cartons, boxes, had she ever had excelsior or maybe it was fiberglass she'd had, and that's not good for a squirrel, glass fibers, supposing fiberglass was in fact made of glass . . . She groped around on the shelves and felt the old uncertainty, the one affecting everything that can occur in many different ways, stumbling over forgetfulness and knowledge, memory and imagination, rows and rows of boxes and you never knew which ones were empty . . . I have to get a grip on myself. It's a box of cotton wadding, for the motor, a carton under the stairs. She found it and started pulling out cotton in long, reluctant tufts. The resistance and the darkness became an image of nighttime dreams, dreams about hurrying and nearly too late. She tore at the nasty, tough material and knew that she didn't have time, and then it was no longer about the squirrel but about everything, everything that can be too late. Finally she took the whole carton in her arms and tried to take it with her up the cellar stairs. It was too big. It caught in the opening. She pressed on it with her shoulders and neck, the carton burst and the wadding flew all over the floor. Now it was a question of seconds. She ran across the granite, stumbled and ran, crept around the woodpile and pushed in wadding everywhere it would be easy to find and wouldn't get wet. There you go. Build! Make yourself a nest!

Then she was done, there was nothing more she could do. Her big body had never felt so heavy. Slowly, she settled herself into a sheltered crevice on one side of the rock, drew up her legs, and completely forgot the squirrel. She was safe and private, completely indifferent in her sweaters, in her boots and raincoat, deep inside a warm space of damp wool and good conscience.

Shortly after noon, it started to rain. She was awakened by an insight that had ripened while she slept. It was the winter wood, the wood that was needed every day through the whole winter.

Her repeated antlike trips across the granite, sawing and chopping, deeper and deeper, would make her a stubborn and merciless enemy, coming steadily closer, opening new gaps for cold and light to reach a terrified and outraged squirrel in its nest of wadding.

They'd have to divide the winter wood, that much was crystal clear. One woodpile for the squirrel and one for herself, and it had to happen right away. Her body was stiff after her nap, but she was altogether calm because there was only one thing to be done. She went straight for the woodpile, which was as large and heavy as a house. She heaved down logs, then grabbed one end of one log and staggered with it down the rock face toward the cottage. The granite was slippery, the moss slid away beneath her boots, but she continued all the way down and tumbled the log against the wall of the cottage, then turned and walked back up the hill. They had to be carried, not rolled. A rolling log is a loose cannon, a weight crushing everything in its path. It had to be carried, carefully, all the way to wherever it was needed. The person carrying must also be a log, heavy and unwieldy but full of strength and potential. Everything must be put in its proper place, which is what the potential is for . . . I carry, steadier and steadier. I breathe a new way, my sweat is salty.

It was nearly dusk, and still raining. The trip up and down the granite slope became a quiet, automatic unreality. As she moved up and back down again, she entered a delirium of lifting and carrying and balancing, dropping the wood with a crash against the cottage wall and then walking back up. She grew strong and sure. All the words were flattened and turned off. Beams, boards, planks, logs. She tore off her sweaters and let them lie in the rain. I'm making something the way I pictured it. I'm moving what's in the wrong place and putting it in the right place. My legs strain in their boots. I could carry stones. Overturn and roll them with a crowbar and a fulcrum, huge stones, and build a wall around me with every stone in its place. But maybe there's no need to build a wall around an island.

As evening came on, she began to tire. Her legs started to wobble. She let the logs lie and carried lumber instead. Finally she carried only smaller driftwood to the back wall of the cottage, while small, anxious thoughts ran through her mind. She imagined that the squirrel didn't live *under* the woodpile but

right in the middle of it, where it wasn't damp. She'd made a mistake. Every time she raised a plank, it was maybe that particular plank that formed the roof of the squirrel's nest. Every piece of wood she lifted could disturb or destroy. Whoever dared touch this woodpile must calculate exactly how the logs lay and how they balanced one another, must think calmly and wisely and precisely, know when to heave on a log and when to tease it out with care and patience.

She listened to the whispering silence over the island, to the rain and the night. It's impossible, she thought. I won't go up there again. She returned to the cottage and undressed and went to bed. She didn't light the lamp this evening, which was a violation of ritual, but it would show the squirrel how little she cared about what happened on this island.

The next morning, the squirrel did not come to eat. She waited for a long time, but it didn't come. There was no reason for the squirrel to feel hurt or suspicious. Everything she had done was simple, unambiguous, and fair. She had divided the woodpile and withdrawn. More than fair. The squirrel's woodpile was several times larger than her own. If the animal had the least personal trust in her, if it perceived her in any way as a friendly fellow creature, then it must see that from the very beginning, she had tried to help.

She sat down at the table. She sharpened her pencil and put a sheet of paper on the desk in front of her, perpendicular, parallel with the edge of the table. This always made the squirrel easier to understand.

If now, in spite of everything, the squirrel saw her as movement, as an object, something unimportant and insignificant, then that also meant it did not see her as an enemy. She tried to concentrate. She made a serious effort to imagine how the squirrel perceived her and in what way its fright at the woodpile might have changed its attitude. It was possible that the squirrel had been nearly ready to begin liking her and was then seized by distrust at that decisive moment. On the other hand, if it regarded her as nothing special, as a part of the island, a part of everything that withered as autumn swept on toward winter, then it would not see the episode at the woodpile as a hostile gesture but rather as a kind of storm, the kind of change

that . . .

She was suddenly tired and started drawing squares and triangles on the paper. The squirrel seemed harder and harder to understand. She drew serpentine lines between the squares and the triangles and tiny little leaves growing out in every direction. The rain had stopped. The sea was swollen, shiny and tumid—such eternal chatter about the beauty of the sea! And then she saw the boat.

It was a long way off, but it was coming, it was moving. It had an inorganic shape that was neither gull nor stone nor buoy. The boat was coming straight toward the island. There was nothing out here to head for except the island. Boats in profile are harmless. They pass along the marked channels, but this one was headed straight on, black as a flyspeck.

She grabbed up her papers—several fluttered to the floor—and tried to push them into the drawer, but they bunched up and refused to go in. Anyway, it was wrong, quite wrong, they should lie out in plain sight where they'd be misleading and protective. She pulled them out again and smoothed them. Who was it who came, who dared to come? It was them, the others, now they'd found her. She ran around the room moving chairs and objects, then moving them back again because the room was unalterable. The black dot had come closer. She grabbed the edge of the table with both hands, stood still, and listened for the sound of the motor. There was nothing she could do. They were coming. Coming straight at her.

When the sound of the motor was very close, she threw open the window on the back side of the cottage, jumped out, and ran. It was too late to launch her own boat. She bent over, ran to the far side of the island, and slipped down into a crack in the granite near the shore. From here, she could no longer hear the motor, only the slow motion of the waves on the rock. What if they came ashore? They see the boat. The cottage is empty. They start to wonder, they walk up onto the island, and they see me crouching here. It won't do. I have to go back. She started to crawl, slowing down as she approached the top of the island. The motor had stopped. They'd gone ashore. She lay down full length in the wet grass, inched herself forward a couple of meters, and rose up on her elbows to have a look.

The boat had anchored over a bank not far from the island.

They were fishing. Three square-shaped men sat dibbing for cod, drinking coffee from a thermos. Possibly they were talking a bit. Occasionally they reeled in their lines. Maybe they were catching fish. Her neck got tired and she let her head sink onto her arms. She didn't care about squirrels, not about dibbers, not about anyone, she just slid down into a great disappointment and admitted to herself that she was disappointed. She thought, How can this be? Why am I beside myself because they're coming and then terrifically disappointed when they don't come ashore?

The next day, she decided not to get up at all. It was a dreary and excellent decision. She thought no further than this: I will never again get up. It was a day with rain, a quiet, steady rain that might continue for days. That's good, I like rain. Curtains and draperies of rain, endless infinities of rain going on and on, pattering rustling and pattering—across the roof. Not like sunshine, which hour by hour moves through the room like a challenge, crossing the windowsill, the rug, certifying afternoon on the rocking chair, then disappearing on the stove hood in red, like an accusation. Today is honorably and simply gray, an anonymous, timeless day that doesn't count.

She made a warm cavity for her heavy body and drew the covers over her head. Through a little air hole for her nose she could see two pink wallpaper roses. Nothing could get at her. Slowly she drifted back to sleep. She had learned to sleep more and more. She loved sleep.

The rain darkened toward evening when she woke up hungry. It was very cold in the room. She wrapped herself in her blanket and went down to the cellar to get a can of food. She forgot the flashlight and took a can at random in the dark. And stopped, listening, stock-still with the can in her hand. The squirrel was somewhere in the cellar. There was a tiny scurrying sound and then silence. But she knew it was there. It was going to live all winter in her cellar, and its nest could be anywhere. She'd have to leave the vent open and make sure it didn't get covered with snow. And she'd have to move all the canned food and everything else she needed up into the cottage. And nevertheless she'd never know for sure if the squirrel was living in the cellar or the woodpile.

She went up and closed the trapdoor. The can she'd brought

with her was boiled mutton with dill sauce, which she didn't like. A belt of clear sky had opened up at the horizon, a narrow, glowing band of sunset. The islands lay like coal-black streaks and lumps in the burning sea. The fire burned all the way to the shore, where the waves swallowed it and then slid around the point in the same curve over and over again as they broke over the slimy November granite. She ate slowly and saw how the red deepened across the sky and the water, a violent, unthinkable crimson. And then suddenly the red winked out, everything went violet, lapsed slowly to gray and then into early night.

She was wide awake. She dressed and lit the lamp and all the candles she could find, got a fire going in the stove. She turned on her flashlight and put it in the window. Finally she hung a paper lantern outside the door, where it shone clearly and steadily in the quiet night. Now she took out the last of the Madeira and put it on the table beside her glass. She walked out onto the rock and left the door open. The glowing cottage was beautiful and mysterious, like a lighted porthole in a foreign ship. She walked all the way to the end of the point and began walking around the island, very slowly, right at the water's edge, and the whole time she turned her face toward the wide-open darkness of the sea. Only when she'd walked around the entire island and had come back to the point would she turn and consider her illuminated cottage. Then she'd walk straight into its warmth, close the door, and be home.

When she came into the cottage, the squirrel was sitting on the table. The animal dashed away, the bottle fell and started to roll, she leaped forward too late, and the bottle shattered on the floor. She got shards of glass between her fingers, and the rug soaked up a dark Madeira stain.

She raised her head and looked at the squirrel. It hung on the wall among the books, legs outspread, heraldic, immobile. She stood up and took one step toward the squirrel; one more step; it didn't move, and she stretched out her hand toward the animal, closer and closer, very slowly—and the squirrel bit her, quick as lightning, sharp as a scissors. She screamed and went on screaming with rage in the empty room. She stumbled across the broken bottle and outdoors, where she stood and bellowed at the squirrel. Never ever had anyone forfeited a confidence, misused a

covenant the way this squirrel had done. She didn't know if she had reached out her hand to the animal in order to caress or strangle it. It didn't matter, she had reached out her hand. She went in and swept up the broken glass, blew out all the candles, and put more wood in the stove. Then she burned everything she had written about the squirrel.

In the time that followed, none of their rituals changed. She put out food on the rock slope and the squirrel came and ate. She didn't know where it lived and didn't care. She no longer went into the cellar or up to the woodpile on the hill. It showed her contempt, an indifference that didn't stoop to revenge. But she moved about the island differently, impulsively. She could rush out of the cottage and slam the door behind her. She rattled the pans and stomped on the floor. Finally she started running. She would stand still for a long time, motionless, and then set off across the granite, running and panting back and forth across the island, flapping her arms and screaming. She didn't care in the least whether the squirrel saw her or not.

One morning it had snowed, a thin covering of snow that didn't melt. Now the cold was coming. She must get the motor running, go to town, buy things. She went and looked at the motor, picked it up for a moment and then put it back against the wall of the cottage. Maybe in a few days. The wind was blowing. Instead, she started looking for the squirrel's paw prints in the snow. The ground was white and untouched around the cellar air hole and the woodpile. She walked the shoreline, walked the whole island systematically, but the only prints she found were her own. Clear and black, they cut the island into rectangles and triangles and long curves. Later that day, she grew suspicious and looked under the furniture in the cottage, opened drawers and the closet. Finally she climbed up on the roof and looked down the chimney. You little bastard, you're making me ridiculous, she said to the squirrel. Then she went to the point and counted the pieces of lumber, the squirrel boats she'd set out for a following wind to the mainland in order to show the squirrel how little she cared for it. They were still there, all six. For a moment she was uncertain. Had there been six, or maybe seven? She should have written it down. Not writing it down was indefensible. She went back to the cottage, shook out the rug,

and swept the floor. Nowadays everything got out of order. Sometimes she brushed her teeth in the evening and didn't bother to light the lamp. The lack of order was because she no longer had the Madeira to divide the day into proper periods and make them clear and easy.

She washed every window and rearranged the bookcase, not by author this time but in alphabetical order by title. When she'd finished, she happened to think of a better and more personal system and decided to arrange the books according to herself—the ones she liked most on the top shelf, the ones she liked least on the bottom. She discovered to her amazement that there wasn't a single book she liked. So she let them stay the way they were and sat down by the window to wait for more snow. There was a bank of clouds to the south. They might bring snow.

That evening she felt a sudden wish for company and went to the top of the island with her walkie-talkie. She pulled up the antenna, turned it on, and listened. There was a distant scratching and swishing. A couple of times she'd picked up conversations between two boats. It might happen again. She waited for a long time. The night was coal black and very quiet. She closed her eyes and waited patiently. Now she heard something very far away, no words but two voices talking to each other. They were slow and calm. They came closer, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. Now she heard that they were winding up their conversation, their tone of voice changed and their sentences got shorter. They were saying goodbye, and it was too late—and she started screaming Hello, it's me, can you hear me, although she knew they couldn't, and then there was only the distant swishing noise and she turned it off. Stupid, she said to herself. It occurred to her that the walkie-talkie batteries might work in the radio and she went back to have a try. They were the wrong size. She needed to go into town. Madeira, batteries. Under batteries she wrote nuts and then crossed it out. It was gone. There must have been seven pieces of wood after all and not six, all at precisely the same distance from the water, sixty-five centimeters. She read through her list and suddenly it was an inventory in a foreign language and seemed completely alien. Shear pins, Mobilat ointment, powdered milk, batteries, a catalog of strange, unreal items. The

only thing that mattered was the bits of lumber, whether there'd been six or seven. She took her measuring tape and flashlight and went down to the shore again. The shore was barren, completely clean. There were no pieces of lumber at all, not one. The sea had risen and taken them.

She was utterly amazed. She stood at the shoreline and shone her flashlight down into the water. The beam broke the surface and lit up a gray-green watery cavern that grew darker as it went down and was filled with very small, indistinct particles that she had never noticed before. She shone the beam farther out over the water and into the darkness. And there the weak cone of light captured color, a clear yellow color, a varnished wooden boat drifting away on the breeze.

She did not understand right away that it was her own boat. She just stared at it, noticing for the first time the helpless, dramatic bobbing of a drifting boat, an empty boat. And then she saw that the boat wasn't empty. The squirrel sat on the rear thwart, staring blindly straight into the light. It looked like a piece of cardboard, a dead toy.

She made half a movement to take off her boots but stopped. The flashlight lay on the rock and was shining at an angle down through the water, a rampart of swollen seaweed that swayed as the sea level rose, then darkness where the rock curved downward. The boat was too far out. It was too cold. It was too late. She took a careless step and the flashlight slid into the water. It did not go out, it stayed on as it sank along the side of the rock face, a smaller and smaller vanishing light that illuminated quick glimpses of a ghostly brown landscape with moving shadows, and then there was nothing but darkness.

"You damned squirrel, you," she said slowly and with admiration. She stood there in the darkness in continuing astonishment, a little weak in the legs and vaguely aware that now everything was radically altered.

Eventually she found her way back across the island. It took a long time. It was only when she closed the door behind her that she felt relief, a great, elated relief. All decisions had been taken from her. She no longer needed to hate the squirrel or worry about it. She didn't need to write about the squirrel, didn't need to write about anything at all. Everything was decided, everything solved, with a clear and unconditional simplicity.

It had begun to snow outside. It snowed thick and quiet. Winter had come. She put more wood on the fire and turned up the lamp. She sat down at the kitchen table and started to write, very rapidly.

On a windless day in November, shortly after sunrise, she saw a person on the boat beach.

Translated by Thomas Teal

THE MONKEY

THE NEWSPAPER came at five o'clock, as it did every morning. He switched on the lamp by his bed, got into his slippers, and shuffled very slowly across the slippery cement floor, taking his usual route among the modeling stands, their shadows black as holes. He'd polished the floor after the last plaster casting. The wind was blowing, and the streetlight outside his studio made the shadows swing, driving them apart and pulling them together again. It was like walking through woods in a moonlit storm. He liked it. The monkey was awake in her cage, hanging on the bars, whining ingratiatingly.

"Bloody monkey," said the sculptor and went out into the front hall to pick up his paper. On his way back to bed he opened the cage door and the monkey ran up his arm and clung firmly to his shoulder. She was shivering. He put on her collar and attached the leash to his wrist. The monkey was an ordinary guenon from Tangier that someone had bought cheap and sold dear. Every now and then she came down with pneumonia and needed penicillin. The kids in the neighborhood knitted sweaters for her.

He got back into bed and opened his paper. The monkey lay quietly warming herself with her arms around his neck. After a while, she sat down in front of him, her pretty hands crossed over her stomach, and stared steadily into his eyes, an expression of perpetual, sad patience on her narrow gray face. "Stare away, you damned orangutan," the sculptor said and went on reading. At the second or third page, the monkey would suddenly and with lightning precision jump through the newspaper, but always through the pages he'd already read. It was a ritual—the paper was ripped to shreds, the monkey shrieked in triumph and then lay down to sleep. It could be liberating every morning at five o'clock to read through all the world's worst shit and then have the shittiness confirmed by seeing it all shredded and rendered unreadable. She helped him dispose of it. Now she jumped. "You bugger," said the sculptor. "You cretinous old flea circus!" He invented new insults every morning. He stuffed her in under the

quilt to sleep and made sure she had air.

The monkey began to snore and he turned to the arts column. He knew they'd pan his new show, but he found instead a patronizing generosity that he hadn't expected. He was so old they had to be kind. Without the monkey, he'd have turned to the arts column at once, but she helped him to read it in passing as if it were just another page. "Sleep, you little bastard," he said. "You're too dumb to understand. All you care about is getting attention. And breaking things." It was true: The monkey was like all the rest of them. The tiniest crack, the least stain or defect, and her fingers were there to make it worse and pick it apart. She noticed everything, every tiny sign of weakness, and that's where she'd bite and rip and tear. That's the way monkeys are, but they don't know any better and so we forgive them. The others are unforgivable.

The sculptor dropped the newspaper on the floor and turned towards the wall. When he woke up, it was much too late and he got out of bed with the usual awful feeling of having wasted time. He was very tired. First he put the monkey in her cage. She didn't move, just sat in one corner, her back very narrow in its hand-knit sweater. There was heavy traffic on the street outside, and the elevator was running nonstop. He rinsed out some clay rags and swept the floor. It's easy to sweep polished cement, a long brush that gets in between the legs of the modeling stands and glides across the floor like silk, then into the dustpan and into the trash. He liked sweeping.

Out of habit, he went to the window a couple of times, but he could no longer see out because it was covered with plastic to soften the light. He fed the monkey. He decided to change his sheets and considered dragging the plaster box out into the courtyard but decided against it and did a little more sweeping instead. He collected some old scraps of soap too small to get a grip on, dropped them into a jar and poured in water. He took the clay rags from the statuette and looked at it, swung the top of the modeling stand halfway around and back again. He walked over to the monkey cage and said, "You old carcass, you're so ugly you make me sick." The monkey screamed a challenge and stuck her hands out through the bars.

He called Savolainen, but hung up before anyone answered. For that matter, he might as well go eat and get it over with. He

decided to take the monkey with him to give her a little change of scenery. But she didn't want to go, just threw herself back and forth from one side of the cage to the other. "Okay, what do you want?" he said. "Do you want to come out, or do you want to stay here in this mess?" He waited. Finally she came out and sat quite still while he put on her catskin coat. When he tied her cap under her chin, she raised her face and looked at him, a straight, expressionless gaze from yellow eyes placed close together. The sculptor looked away, suddenly upset by the unmoving animal's attitude of absolute indifference.

They went out together and he held her inside his coat. The wind was still blowing. Some youngsters were hanging around on the esplanade, and when they caught sight of him they came running, shouting, "It's the monkey! It's the monkey!" She jumped out of his coat and rushed back and forth on her leash, screaming at the boys, who hollered back and followed the two of them to the corner. There she bit one of them, a quick, sharp bite. "Shitty monkey! Shitty monkey!" the children chanted. He hurried into the café and put the monkey on the floor.

"So you brought it back again," said the doorman. "You know what happened last time. Animals aren't allowed."

"Animals?" the sculptor said. "Do you mean cats and dogs? Or are you referring to your customers and the way they behave?"

Savolainen and the others were sitting at a table eating.

"Monkeys," Savolainen observed, "are known for their destructiveness."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Their need to destroy. They break things."

"And for their tenderness," the sculptor said. "They try to offer comfort."

Lindholm grinned. "I'll bet you could use some of that today. But it could've been worse."

The monkey sat inside his coat; he could feel her shivering.

"Worse?" Savolainen burst out with mock horror. "Do you mean, *even* worse?"

"Take it easy, you little bastard," said the sculptor, and then, in the sudden silence, "I was talking to the monkey."

"Listen," Pehrman said. "You shouldn't care what they say. They write what they think, and so what? Except it's a shame everyone believes what they say. We're *out*, that's all. Back at the

bottom. And it'll be hell to crawl back up again."

"If you're old," Stenberg pointed out. "What does it eat? Clay? Sure looks like it. What do you call it?"

"Bloody shitboot," he said. "Sadistic fucking birdbrain."

All at once the monkey ran across the table, knocking over glasses as she went, bit Stenberg right through the ear and then ran screeching back to hide in his coat.

"Tenderness," said Lindholm. "Wasn't that what you said? A very tenderhearted animal."

The sculptor stood up and replied that that was just exactly what he'd said and moreover he didn't care for the menu at this place and he had things to do.

"There's a Tarzan film at the Ritz," said the doorman. "I assume that's where you're headed."

"Of course," the sculptor said. "How intelligent you are." He overtipped him out of pure contempt.

The wind had picked up. They walked across the esplanade; the boys had gone. It's no use, the sculptor thought. There's nothing in it for me anymore. The monkey was having a fit. He tried to make it warm for her under his coat, but she wiggled her way out and was choking on her own collar. She started to scream, so finally he undid her leash. For a moment she didn't move, then she jumped out of his hands and up into a tree, held tight to the trunk and hung there like a little gray rat, looking scared. She was shivering with the cold. Her long tail was within his reach—he could have caught her, but he just stood there and did nothing. Then, quick as lightning, the monkey disappeared up into the leafless tree and hung from one of the highest limbs like some dark fruit, and he thought, you poor little bastard. You're freezing, but you've got to climb.

Translated by Thomas Teal

THE CARTOONIST

THE NEWSPAPER had been running *Blubby* for almost twenty years when Allington quit and they were forced to continue the strip with a different artist. They had material for only a couple of weeks ahead, so the need was urgent. They had contractual agreements with other countries that promised a security margin of at least two months. And Blubby was a clever strip that tore along at a furious pace, so not just anyone could do it. They took a handful of artists on approval and gave them office space, which saved time on supervision. The same assignment for all of them, obviously. They dismissed two of them after only a few days and replaced them with others. The editor in charge went around a couple of times a day to have a look and help them get a handle on what the paper was after. He was a tall man by the name of Fried. He had a bad back, presumably because he was forever leaning down over cartoonists' drawing boards. There was one ambitious young artist who seemed to be the best of them, but he wasn't good enough yet.

"You have to remember," Fried said, "you have to keep in mind the whole time that the tension has to mount. You've got a strip of three or four panels, five if absolutely necessary, but four's better. Okay. In the first one, you resolve the tension from the previous day. Catharsis, relief, the drama continues. You build up new tension in the second panel, increase it in panel three, and so on. I've explained that. You're good, but you get lost in details, commentary, embroidery that gets in the way of the red thread. It has to be a straight line, simple, and move towards a peak, a climax, you see?"

"I know," said Samuel Stein. "I know. I'm trying."

"Imagine someone opening his newspaper," Fried went on. "He's sleepy, he's in a lousy mood, he's in a hurry to get to work. He checks the headlines on page one and dives into the comics. He's in no condition to grasp subtleties right at the moment, that's too much to ask. But his curiosity needs a little excitement, and he wants a laugh, wants to grin at something funny for a

second—natural enough, right? Okay, he gets all that. We give it to him. It's important. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Stein said. "I think I got it from the beginning. It's just that it all has to happen so quickly. I just don't have the space to get everything in and still do something good—not really."

"It'll be good," Fried said. "You'll get there. Relax. I can tell you confidentially that you're one of the better ones. You draw well, and your backgrounds are fine. I have to move on."

It was a very small room with brown walls, essentially just a storeroom weighed down with crowded shelves and cupboards and a large, heavy, old-fashioned desk that had drawers all the way to the floor. The walls were covered with old calendars, clippings, ads, odd posters, announcements, clumps of paper, all held in place by thumbtacks. The room gave an impression of a life that had passed long ago and been forgotten, a life no one had had time to tidy away. Samuel Stein liked the room. It gave him a feeling of being hidden and safe along with his work. And he liked being a cog in the machinery of the great, distinguished newspaper, liked feeling its respect.

The room was very cold. He stood up, and the chill engulfed him. The whole time he could hear the distant thudding of the printing presses and, over them, the sound of traffic on the street. He was freezing. A work blouse and a sweater hung beside the door. He put on the sweater and stuck his hands into the pockets. In the right pocket, Sam Stein found a piece of paper, a list. He read it standing at the window. "Used," it said in very small letters. "Ski skate etc. fun of government and modern art went to ball 1 masked 2 cocktail p. gangster astronaut 3x Love + vamp out hamburger India ink lighter background laundry call A. G."

It was a cartoonist who had worked here, and the sweater was his. Stein was curious and opened a drawer. It contained a mix of pencil stumps, tape, empty ink bottles, paper clips, all the usual junk. But maybe worse than usual. All of it had been stirred together as if in a rage. He opened the next drawer. It was empty, completely empty. He let the other drawers be and put on some water for tea—there was a hot plate on the floor under the window. It could have been Allington who'd had this room. Maybe he never worked at home, maybe he sat right here for twenty years and drew his *Blubby*. He had stopped abruptly, in the middle of a story. And you're supposed to give six months'

notice. The outline had apparently got lost at the fifty-third strip. Normal length was usually eighty. Stein had asked why Allington couldn't reconstruct the story. No, he wasn't able to. Didn't he want to? Had he forgotten?

"I don't know," Fried said. "It was a different department that took care of that. Don't worry about it. Go on from where he stopped and do something of your own, but preferably so no one will see the break. You can leave off the signature."

The tea water was boiling. Stein removed the saucepan and pulled out the plug. He took down the cup and the sugar he'd found on a shelf. There was no spoon. He had his own tea bags.

Six days later Fried came in and said that now they'd decided. Stein had the job, no contest, and there'd be a contract in a few days. For seven years. The board had been very pleased, but wanted to reemphasize the need for greater suspense. Fried looked tired as he stood there with a smile on his soft, vague features. He stepped forward and shook hands with Stein and touched his shoulder gently in a gesture of encouragement and protectiveness.

"That's great," Stein said. "That's really great. Can you use the stuff I've done, or should I start over from the beginning?"

"No, God no. We don't have time for that. We'll throw in the material we've got and you can push up the speed until we've got two months in the bank."

"Tell me something," Stein said. "Did he work in this room?"

"Allington?"

"Yes. Allington."

"Yes, this was his room. It's kind of fitting that you assume his mantle in the very same workroom, don't you think?"

"There's a lot of his things here. I mean, I didn't poke around that much. But is he going to come and get them?"

"I'll see to it that it's all moved out," Fried said. "It's very crowded in here. I'll ask someone to get it all out of the way."

"Is he dead?" Stein said.

"No, no, not at all."

"So he got sick."

"My dear fellow, don't worry yourself," Fried replied. "He's perfectly all right. And now I will simply wish you good luck with the job."

In the beginning, Stein worked without touching anything in the room. His first strip was published, without a signature, and no one noticed the difference. Anyway, Allington hadn't signed his strips for the last three years of his contract, and that helped. Stein increased his pace to several strips a day. He was learning more and more. He learned to do half a dozen strips in pencil and then ink them all at the same time, beginning with pure black surfaces in the morning. Once he was warmed up, he'd start on details and along towards afternoon when he was completely sure of his hand, he'd draw the long lines and the elegant small bits that needed to be done quickly and deftly. Then he'd go on to the next batch.

He came steadily closer to the prescribed lead time. They had congratulated him when his first strip was printed without any public reaction. He was depressed that day, but it passed, and he went on working steadily, pleased at doing a good job that was very well paid. He felt secure. He no longer had to dash around with illustrations and confer with irresolute, pretentious authors —three or four trips for every blessed dust jacket. Take orders, meet authors, turn in his work, wait, go in to collect his fee, and occasionally go up to the printer's once or twice to make sure the color separations were correct.

Now everything went like clockwork. He didn't even have to deliver his work; he just left the day's drawings on his desk and someone picked them up that evening. He picked up his salary in the cashier's office every other week. Fried no longer paid him visits. He just saw him now and then on the stairs.

"You never come to look anymore," Stein said.

"No longer necessary, my boy," said Fried jokingly. "You're doing splendidly. But God help you if you get stuck or take a wrong turn. I'll be there like a shot!"

"God forbid!" Stein said and laughed. He had bought himself an electric heater and the newspaper had paid for it. They were taking care of him now, and with good reason. *Blubby* ran in thirty or forty countries.

Occasionally Stein would go down around the corner and have a drink. He liked the dark, messy bar. It was full of men in the same line of work who talked about their jobs, had a drink, and went back to the paper. He met the other cartoonists. They were friendly and treated him like a greenhorn, a boy who wasn't

really into the game yet but seemed quite promising. Their attitude was more affectionate than condescending. They didn't buy each other rounds; just hung over the bar for a while with a glass in one hand, then went back.

There was one of them he admired, an extremely talented artist named Carter. Carter didn't do pencil sketches, he drew directly with India ink. Terrifying, naturalistic, historical scenes. He was a heavy, very ugly man with reddish hair who moved slowly. He never smiled but seemed amused by what went on around him.

"Tell me something," he said. "Are you one of those people who are prevented from doing Great Art because they draw comic strips?"

"No," Stein said. "Not at all."

"Good for you," Carter said. "They're insufferable. They're neither fish nor fowl and they can't stop talking about it."

"Did you know Allington?" Stein asked.

"Not well."

"Was he one of them? I mean, one of the insufferable ones?"

"No."

"But why did he quit?"

"He got tired," Carter said and emptied his drink and went back to do some work.

The newspaper had forgotten to tidy up Allington's room, which was just as well. Stein liked sitting encapsulated in a century of collected and forgotten props. They made up a kind of warm quilting, a faded tapestry that surrounded him softly on all sides. Eventually he started opening drawers, one a day, the way you open windows on an advent calendar. He found the drawers with the most recent fan mail, bound in packets with rubber bands: "Answered," "Can Wait," "Important," "Send drawing of B." Another empty drawer. A drawer of glossy prints of *Blubby* on heavy stock, sophisticated vignettes for adults and funny pictures for children. Papers, papers, clippings, bills, socks, photos of children, receipts, cigarettes, corks, string—the whole accumulation of dead life that heaps up around people who've lost the strength to be attentive. Nothing about the strip. Stein couldn't find any notes about Allington's work other than that list in the right-hand pocket of the sweater.

As Stein worked on *Blubby*, Allington grew more and more real

to him. Allington not coming up with ideas and staring down at the street through the gray windowpanes, Allington brewing tea and rooting around in his drawers, answering the phone or completely forgotten between deadlines, Allington famous and worn out. Did he feel lonely, or was he wary of people? Did he work better in the mornings or later when the paper was quiet? What did he do when he got stuck, or did he work at a steady pace for twenty years? Now I need to be careful, Sam Stein thought. I mustn't romanticize him. If Allington had stood at a machine for twenty years, no one would have made a big deal of it. He was popular, and well paid. So am I.

One weekend, Carter asked Stein if he'd like to come out to his place in the country. It was a great mark of favor; Carter disliked almost everyone and wanted to be left in peace. It was early spring, and the countryside was completely quiet. Carter took him around and showed him his pigs and chickens. He showed him his snakes, lifted a stone in the lawn very carefully and said, "There they are. They're still a little sleepy, but they'll liven up."

Stein was fascinated. "What do you feed them?" he said.

"Nothing. They feed themselves. There are lots of frogs and toads and other things they like."

Stein had heard that Carter never answered letters, that he didn't even open them. He wasn't the least bit curious about their contents, and his conscience didn't bother him.

"You can't do that," Stein said. "You're famous, they admire you. Those letters are from children, and they need to be answered."

"Why?" said Carter.

They were sitting in front of the house with drinks. It was very warm and still.

"They have faith," Stein said. "When I was little I wrote to the president of France and asked him to close down the Foreign Legion."

"And did you get an answer?"

"Certainly did. My mother wrote a reply from the president and said now they were going to shut the whole thing down. With French stamps and everything."

"You're too young," Carter said. "It's better for them to get used to it right from the start, you know, used to the fact that things don't turn out the way you imagined and that it doesn't

matter that much." He went off to feed the pigs and was gone for quite a while. When he came back, Stein started talking about Allington and how he'd worked steadily for twenty years and then just walked away without even leaving an outline.

"He got tired," Carter said.

"Did he ever talk to you about it?"

"No, he said almost nothing. One day he was gone. Left a note on his desk. In fact it was a half-finished strip, and on it he'd written 'I'm tired.' He never even came back for his money."

"But didn't they try to find him?"

"Good lord," Carter said. "Just listen to you. Didn't they try to find him? Holy Moses. The entire police department was out searching. Everyone was hysterical. Blubby about to breathe his last . . . The franchise holders got wind of it and were running in and out of the offices like madmen."

"Franchise holders?"

"You don't know a thing, do you?" said Carter, lighting his pipe. "The people who live on Blubby. Have you never seen a charming little Blubby in plastic or marzipan or candle wax?" He stood up and started walking slowly back and forth on the grass, chanting, "Blubby curtains, Blubby jelly, Blubby clocks and Blubby socks, Blubby shirts and Blubby shorts . . . Shall I go on?"

"I'd rather you didn't," Stein said.

"I could go on for an hour. Allington made sketches for all of it. He was very careful with his comic strip. He was very particular; everything had to be just so. You know, he supervised all of it down to the tiniest detail. Textiles, metals, paper products, rubber, wood, all of it . . . And then there were the Blubby films and Blubby Week and children's theater and journalists and dissertations about Blubby and all the charities and something called the Blubby Marmalade Campaign . . . Holy Moses. Anyway, he couldn't ever say no. And then he got tired."

Stein said nothing, but he looked frightened.

"Don't worry," Carter went on. "None of it's your headache. All you have to do is draw and the paper will take care of all the rest of it."

"But how do you know all that?" Stein said. "He didn't talk to people."

"I've got eyes in my head," Carter said. "And I draw my own strip. But, you see, I can say no. And it's no skin off my nose if

they mess around with my work. Do you get a lot of letters?"

"Yes," Stein said. "But they're all to him. Fried told me to give them to the department. They've got a stamp with Allington's signature and they've got people who sit there and answer them. And if I'm going to write letters," Stein went on angrily, "I'll sign my own name to them, not someone else's."

"You're awfully careful with your name, aren't you?" said Carter with a grin.

They said no more about Allington. Stein had meant to ask if he'd ever been found, but he felt suddenly dejected and said nothing.

Later they saw each other in the bar from time to time, in passing.

Sam Stein came to his third outline. He would work them up in pencil sketches with a little dialogue and give them to Fried. Five or six days later, they'd come back with corrections and he'd find them on his desk. "Better, but you need to pick up the pace." "Cut the references to toilet paper and cemeteries." "Numbers sixty-five to seventy too subtle." "No jokes about the government and the manufacturers." And so on.

People at the paper started to recognize him; he began to belong. It was mostly Johnson he talked to in the bar. Johnson was in advertising, and sometimes when he had the time he'd answer Allington's fan mail.

"Oh, Carter," said Johnson. "I know. All he cares about are his pigs and those snakes—and money. He's so fabulously talented, the drawings run out of him like diarrhea, but he has absolutely no ambition. And why should he? Did you know he also grows vegetables and some cousin of his sells them at a farmers' market?"

"He never answers fan mail," Stein said. "He doesn't give a damn. You know what? These cartoonists—either they're all touchy and conscience-stricken or else they don't give a damn about anything. Am I right?"

"Maybe you're right and maybe you're wrong. I don't know if they're all nuts to begin with or if they get that way from drawing comic strips. Shall we have another?" It was evening and they were lingering in the bar. It was really too late to go back and get anything done.

"This thing with Allington," Stein said. "I can't get free of him.

He's everywhere. What actually happened?"

"He went nuts," Johnson said.

"You mean, really?"

"Well, sort of, more or less."

Sam Stein leaned over the bar and looked into the mirror behind the bottles. I look tired, he thought. But in a few weeks, I can take it easier. I could have Blubby go to a bar. It's been a long time since he did that. He'd gone through four years of Allington's old strips. No one remembered further back than that.

He said, "Is there anyone who knows where he is? I want to talk to him."

"Why? You're doing fine."

"That's not it. I want to know why he couldn't go on."

"But you know that," said Johnson amiably. "You've already figured it out. It's like drummers in jazz bands. After a certain number of years, it's just over. What do you say? Shall we have another?"

"No," Stein said. "I don't think so. I thought I'd do some laundry this evening."

The next morning, Stein went into the storage room behind Allington's office and started pulling down cartons from the shelves, bundles of letters, bags, and boxes. He lined them up on the floor in order to go through all of it. There was fan mail in four boxes and a suitcase. On three of them was the word "Done." One said "Sent things," and on the suitcase was written "Pathetic Cases." On yet another little box Allington had written "Good Letters" and on another, "Anonymous." Product samples, Blubby in every possible material and packaging, all of them with wide blue eyes with big black pupils. Outlines crossed out with a felt-tip pen, all except one, something about the Wild West. A notation: "Not used."

Stein smoothed out Allington's manuscript and put it on his desk. Maybe he could use it. The next carton was "unsorted" and it broke when he pulled it out and a sea of paper flowed out across the floor. Poor man, Stein thought. How he must have hated paper. Messages, queries, bills, exhortations, pleas, accusations, declarations of love . . . There was an address book with neatly noted names and in parentheses the wife's name or the husband's, names of the children, of the dog or the cat . . .

Maybe the courtesy of remembering made letters a little shorter for him—it got him off the hook more easily.

Suddenly Stein didn't want to know more. All he wanted was to try and find Allington. He needed to understand. He had a seven-year contract and he needed to be calmed or alarmed, one or the other, but he had to know.

The next day Stein tried to find Allington's address, but no one could help him.

"My dear boy," Fried said, "you're just wasting your time. Allington has no address. His apartment was essentially untouched and he never came back."

"But the police," Stein said. "They searched for him. They did a lousy job. Here's his address book. A thousand names or more. Have they seen it?"

"Of course they have. They called a few people, but no one knew anything. What do you want with him?"

"I don't know exactly. I want to talk to him."

"I'm sorry," Fried said, "but we've got better things to do. He left us in the lurch, and now we've fixed it. You need to stop brooding about Allington."

That same evening the boy appeared, a kid six or seven years old. Stein had put his work away and was ready to leave.

"It was hard to find you," the child said. "I've brought you a present."

It was a large flat package, wrapped with lots of pieces of string. When Stein had untied them all, he found inside a new package tightly circled with tape. The boy stood quietly as he cut and tore it, until he reached yet another package, which was bound together with plastic bands.

"This is getting more and more exciting," Stein said. "It's like a treasure hunt!" The boy was solemn and silent. The packages grew smaller and smaller, but each wrapping was as hard to open as the one before. Sam Stein began to be uneasy. He wasn't used to children and it bothered him pretending to be Allington. Finally he came to the end and opened a Blubby drawn on silver paper and wearing an astronaut's spacesuit. He blurted out admiring comments that were much too exaggerated. The child didn't move a muscle.

"But what's your name?" Stein said and knew at once that it

was the wrong question, utterly and completely wrong.

The boy said nothing. Then, in a hostile tone, “Where have you been?”

“I was on a trip,” Stein said quickly. “A long trip to a foreign country.”

It sounded idiotic. The boy looked at him very quickly and looked away again.

“Do you draw a lot?” Stein asked.

“No.”

It was awful, totally hopeless. His eyes wandered across the cluttered room looking for help, something to say to this child who admired Allington. He picked up the Wild West from his desk and said, “This one isn’t done yet. I don’t really know how to go on. Come and have a look.”

The boy came closer.

“You see, Blubby’s in the Wild West,” he said, feeling suddenly relieved. “The bad guys are trying to take his spring, which is his only source of water. They’ve hired a lawyer, and the lawyer has come up with a wicked plan. He’s going to say that the spring doesn’t belong to Blubby at all. It’s owned by the state.”

“Shoot him,” the boy said calmly.

“Yes, maybe you’re right. On the street or in a bar?”

“No. That’s too ordinary. Have them ride after each other and the lawyer shoots first.”

“Good,” Stein said. “It’s important that he shoots first, so he’s had his chance. So it’s okay if he dies.”

The boy looked at him and eventually said, “Your new place is too far away for me. When are you coming to mine? I made an altar for you, with pictures.”

“How nice,” Stein said. “Maybe I will soon. I’ve got so much work to do right now. Have you ever drawn with India ink?”

“No.”

“Give it a try. Write your address and my address. Side by side.”

“But you already know them.”

“Yes, but write them anyway. Names and all.”

The boy wrote, slowly and neatly.

When he’d gone, Samuel Stein returned all of John Allington’s things to the back room. They were the possessions of a dead man. But he had the address now of the Allington who was alive.

Allington was living in a hotel in a suburb. He was middle-aged, a perfectly ordinary man, one of the invisible people on a bus. Dressed in something grayish brown. Stein introduced himself and explained that he was his replacement for the comic strip.

"Come in," Allington said. "We can have a drink." The room was clean and seemed very empty.

"How's it going?" Allington asked.

"Quite well. I'm on my fourth outline."

"And how's Fried?"

"There's his bad back, of course, but otherwise he's fine."

"Funny," Allington said. "All of that was so important. How long is your contract?"

"Seven years."

"Sounds right. They don't want to drag it out longer when the strip's been running for such a long time. Sooner or later, people are going to want something new." Allington went out to the kitchen to get their drinks. When he came back, he asked how Stein had found his address.

"There was a boy, Bill Harvey. He came in with a drawing for you. For that matter, here it is."

Allington looked at Blubby the astronaut. "I know," he said. "He was one of the hardest to answer. Never stopped writing. Did he believe you were me?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I pulled it off."

"Do you get your mail directly or does it go to Johnson?"

"To Johnson."

"That's better."

"One thing," Stein said. "It doesn't feel good pretending to be someone I'm not. I'm not used to it."

"I understand," Allington said. "But you get into the swing of it and it gets to be just another part of the game. You spit out letters faster and faster and they take them at face value. You anticipate their reactions and accept their inexhaustible silliness. The same ideas over and over again. With stupid variations."

"Nevertheless," said Stein carefully, "it's a question of responsibility, isn't it? I mean, all these people open their newspapers and read the comics. They read them and they're influenced. Maybe they're not aware of it, but they can't help themselves. You could sneak in a whole lot of stuff that was . . ." He paused. "Positive, somehow. Teach them something. Or

comfort them. Or scare them—make them think. Do you know what I mean?"

"I know," Allington said. "I did that sort of thing for four or five years."

They were silent for a moment.

"We never found your last outline," Stein said. "Did it get lost?"

"Probably."

"But I found one about the Wild West. I was thinking of using it. Shame to waste it."

"The usual story?"

"More or less. Only sixty strips. Maybe a few more."

"Well, well," Allington said. "I think it was something they turned down. You can only use the Wild West maybe once a year. But put it in with the rest; it won't matter. Where do you work?"

"In your room."

"Is it still just as cold?"

"I've put in an electric heater." Stein was quiet for a moment and then asked what he should do with all the stuff in the closet and the desk drawers.

"Have someone carry it out in the yard."

"But I can't do that," Stein said. "After all, it's a life. You can't just dump it in the yard."

Allington started to laugh, and his face was suddenly very appealing. "Stein," he said, "not a life. A little piece of a life. See, I'm not done yet. What is it that bothers you? That I quit and just walked away from all of it? You've only got seven years. You'll get through it somehow. You're not going to hang yourself." He filled their glasses and said, "There was one who did. A villa on the Riviera and a yacht and all the rest of it, and then he goes and hangs himself. Maybe it's not that unusual, but he wrote a letter to other cartoonists and warned them against long contracts. They've got the letter at the paper in their secret museum. Do you want ice?"

"No thanks," Stein said. "I take it straight. What shall I do with this kid? Bill."

"Nothing. He'll grow up and start to admire something else. Believe me, it doesn't pay to go soft in this game."

"You're one to talk," Stein said. "I've looked in your drawers."

“And what did you think?”

Stein hesitated. Then he said, “That you got very tired.”

Allington stood up and walked to the window. It was getting dark. He made a movement as if to draw the curtains but then let them be. He stood looking down at the street.

“I think I should be going,” Stein said. “Thought I’d go back and work for a while.”

“It was their eyes,” said Allington without turning around. “Their cartoon eyes. The same stupid round eyes all the time. Amazement, terror, delight, and so on—all you have to do is move the pupil and an eyebrow here and there and people think you’re brilliant. Just imagine achieving so much with so little. And in fact, they always look exactly the same. But they have to do new things all the time. All the time. You know that. You’ve learned that, right?” His voice was quiet, but it sounded as if he were speaking through clenched teeth. He went on without waiting for a reply. “Novelty! Always something new. You start searching for ideas. Among the people you know, among your friends. Your own head is a blank, so you start using everything they’ve got, squeezing it dry, and no matter what people tell you, all you can think is, Can I use it?“ Allington swung around and stared at Stein, suddenly silent, the ice cubes tinkling violently in his glass. His hand had started shaking. Slowly he said, “Do you understand? Do you see that you can’t afford it, that you don’t have time to be in a hurry?”

Sam Stein had risen from his chair.

“Every day,” Allington went on, “every week and month and year and new year and it never ends—the same creatures with the same pupils creeping around you and over you and never stopping . . .” Allington’s face was changed, swollen, and a muscle was twitching by his mouth.

Stein looked away.

“Forgive me,” said John Allington. “I didn’t mean to . . . Mostly things are fine. In fact they’re getting better and better. I’ve been doing well recently. They tell me I’m much improved. Sit down. Let’s sit for a while. Do you like evening?”

“No,” Stein said. “No. I don’t like it.”

“Do you ever see Johnson?”

“Yes, in the bar sometimes. I like him.”

“Collects stamps. But only with boats on them. I heard about a

man who collected stamps with musical instruments. Funny about collectors. I'm interested in mosses. You know, moss. But then I'd have to live in the country."

"They grow very slowly," Stein said. "And then, as you say, you have to live in the country. And they say the birds destroy them if they have a bad year."

He stopped talking. He wanted to go. The visit had depressed him.

Allington sat and played with a pencil, letting it roll across the table a little way in one direction and then back again.

He drew so beautifully, Stein thought. No one had prettier lines. So light and pure. It always looked like he was having fun drawing them.

Suddenly Allington asked, "How do you find the time?"

"Find the time? Well, it goes along all right. You develop a rhythm."

"I just thought," Allington said, "I just happened to think that, if you get stuck, I might be able to do a couple of strips. Sometime. If you'd like . . ."

Translated by Thomas Teal

WHITE LADY

THEY WERE probably about sixty years old and had clearly dressed for the evening. All three were exhilarated; the man driving the boat guessed they'd had a drink or two before leaving home. As he took them across, they talked a great deal and called him captain, and when they reached the dock they made a great to-do about going ashore and pretended to be afraid of falling in the water.

The restaurant lay on an islet in the middle of the harbor, an odd wooden pavilion with spire-topped towers and tall, extravagantly decorated windows. Now at dusk, the pale gray building was very pretty in a melancholy way. Ellinor said that it lay like a forgotten dream among its dark trees. Or maybe like a wedding cake on a plate that was too small. Ellinor loved similes.

"Yes, you're right!" May exclaimed. "That's just exactly what it looks like. A decorated cake. A gateau. Isn't that what we used to call them?"

"Good heavens, how pretty this is," Regina said. "Just look at the boats." They had walked onto the lawn, May, Ellinor, and Regina, and were standing in a row on the wet grass. The harbor lights were soft and blurred in the evening fog, and against this backdrop of quivering lights, boats were gliding past, all of them on their way out to sea. Black coasting smacks and ketches, their sails like swans' wings, as Ellinor put it. And behind them came the overnight boat to Stockholm, tall, radiantly white, adorned with glowing strings of pearls. Slowly, slowly the great luxury liner glided out from the harbor with all the other boats around it, and every one of them had to swing wide to get past the islet where the three ladies stood. "Now let's go in," Regina said. "It's getting chilly."

The restaurant was empty; the season was almost over. They asked each other if they'd been here before, but only May remembered one time with her father, who'd been a member of the yacht club and had had his own boat berthed in the marina. The stairs were broad and the ceiling unbelievably high, almost

like a church. Highest up, under the tower, was an intricate network of timbers. It was a warm evening, and the windows stood open along the entire length of the veranda. Fog drifted in across the empty tables.

"It's like some film I saw," Regina said. "A big castle with empty rooms and people who didn't know what they wanted."

"*Marienbad*," Ellinor said. "That was an awfully good movie. But why are you whispering?" They took seats at the far end of the veranda. The waiter came, and while they were ordering they found their way back to their initial exhilaration. They were going to eat and drink well, and for this one evening they had left everything behind and were going to enjoy themselves in a new, unusual place, an island from the turn of the century, a building that was almost old when they were children.

"That's what's so exciting," Regina said. "Having it all ahead of us. I'll have a White Lady. I'm wearing a white dress, so I want a White Lady."

"Is that strong?" May asked. "I'll have the same."

Regina called back the waiter to say she'd changed her mind—she wanted the pepper steak instead. And the wine should be at room temperature.

"Did you notice?" May said. "Did you notice how young the waiter was? In a place like this, they ought to be old. But he's young and quick and hears everything you say."

"I'm hungry," Ellinor said. "I'm always hungry. And I never have the nerve to order what I really want. I'm getting fat! And right now, after a real ocean voyage, I'm really especially hungry!" They all laughed, and then she said, suddenly sentimental, "The man driving the boat . . . Just think! He'd been a captain on the seven seas. And then they let him go. He told me. Isn't that awful?"

May said, "You could use that in a book." She fished out her compact and quickly powdered her troubled little face, puffed up her hair, and put the purse on the floor beside her chair. "You're not a bit fat. You're sturdy."

"Junoesque," Regina said. "You know one time in Venice I drank a White Lady, or rather actually it was outside Venice in that casino, whatever it's called. That was my first White Lady. Cheers, girls! Anyway, there I was and I was so young they wouldn't let me in without an escort. Well, along came this bank

director from Fiume—”

“What?”

“Fiume. A bank director from Fiume. And I was young and sweet, so he invited me in and told me to bet as much as I wanted on roulette, because beginners always have such good luck, he said. It was foggy outside, just like this.”

“Here comes the food!” May cried. “Girls, girls, this is going to be a real feast!”

The waiter smiled and asked which of them was to taste the wine.

“I’m the eldest,” Ellinor said. “I’m several weeks older than any of you! I’m the Grand Old Lady.” She sipped the wine and smiled at him and said, “Perfect. The temperature is just right. What shall we drink to?”

“To you!” Regina cried. “To your young people’s books.”

“How nice of you,” Ellinor said. “Cheers. Though I don’t know that anyone reads them anymore. Have you noticed how the air smells of night?”

Regina said, “You have such beautiful thoughts. But it smells of the city. The sewers. It did in Venice, too, and it was just beautiful, beautiful . . .”

May said they ought to change places. It was Ellinor who should sit opposite the window. The boats and all. “It could give you new ideas,” May said. But Ellinor thought it was unnecessary. After a while they started talking about their friend the Count. It was some time since he’d called. “When was the last time he called you?”

“I don’t know. Last spring. He’s always so busy.”

“Time,” said Regina. “Speaking of time, that bank director from Fiume told me that the only thing he no longer had was time. He had everything else, money and everything, but he no longer had time. I didn’t want to bet on roulette. I thought it was awful, so we went into the bar instead. ‘Dear child,’ he said. ‘Pretty little child. Order whatever you’d like. Green, white, red, yellow.’ That’s exactly what he said. ‘I have everything, but I also have a bad stomach.’ ”

“I know,” said Ellinor.

“Do you also have a bad stomach?”

“No, but you’ve told that story before.”

“Not to me,” May said. “What did you order?”

“White. A White Lady. I thought it sounded so pretty. There was a little rim of ice on the glass. Look, there still is.”

“About the Count,” Ellinor said. “Has he called any of you?”

“Never,” Regina said. “He’s forgotten us. He’s way too famous. We danced once. No, twice. Why don’t they have any music here?”

Ellinor said, “They’ve been playing music the whole time—you just haven’t heard it. Slow stuff on tape for the old folks. Ti-di-di-da, ti-di-di-da. Like in *Marienbad.*”

“And foghorns,” May said.

They listened. “Okay,” Regina said, “it’s foghorns. They’re howling. How are they howling, Ellinor?”

“Like old, tired animals,” Ellinor said, “that no longer have the strength to be afraid. Hey, what’ll you give me for that one?”

“Ten plus!” May cried. “They’re too tired even to be afraid. They just howl.”

Regina stood up and said she was going to the ladies’ room. On the way, she walked past the bar and asked if they didn’t have any younger music. “So we won’t feel so old,” she added, and laughed. The waiter said that they had younger music but maybe it would make her feel even older. All the way downstairs, Regina wondered if he’d been cheeky, too familiar, and in that case, what she should have said. In any case it was too late now. The ladies’ room was large and cool, tulle curtains knotted above the windows, each little stall provided with a faded family name, easy chairs covered in shiny chintz. Someone had left a red lifebelt hanging on a peg. Down here she cold hear the ships’ foghorns much better. Regina grew melancholy. She stood and looked at her face in the neon light that made everything hard and hollow and thought it had been somehow less heavy in the old days. Her face had grown too long over the years, and her nose as well. She went back upstairs and said to the others, “I can’t understand why he never calls.”

“He’s so rarely in town,” Ellinor said. “But maybe we could dance.”

“Speaking of dancing,” Regina said. “That time. They couldn’t stop playing to dance. There was an atmosphere of tension, a kind of fear, if you know what I mean. The ones playing for high stakes, I mean insane sums of money, were fenced in with a rope. Four people with a fence around them so no one would disturb

them. There was dead silence. No one dared say a word."

"How strange," May said. "Have you ever been back?"

"No. I thought about it once, but it never happened."

Some people came in at the other end of the veranda, very young people. "Like a flock of birds," said Ellinor, "a swarm of birds that settle for a moment, for as long as it suits them." The music suddenly changed to something entirely different. It had grown dark outside, and the harbor lights were sharp and distant. It was as if the island and the restaurant had slipped farther out to sea, as if they were floating away.

"I'm so happy," May said. "It's as if nothing was important anymore. Is this our second bottle?"

"Yes," Ellinor said.

The young people were not dancing. Why should they? They could afford not to. Wherever they went, their own music followed them. They talked quietly and were completely involved with one another.

"What would you say to an Irish coffee?" Regina said. "For the fun of it. You know, something unusual. I mean, now that the three of us are out together for once. She put her arms on the table and tried to sing along—ba-ding, ba-ding, doo-ah, doo-ah. "It's got a nice beat, doesn't it? Why don't they dance? The Count should be here."

"He's probably just polite," said Ellinor.

"Do you think any of them know you're an author? We could talk to them a little. *Garçon! Ciao.* Three Irish coffees. You don't get a lot of customers in the fall."

"No, not this late," the waiter said. "We'll be closing soon for the winter."

"Doesn't it get lonely here sometimes?" Regina said. "I mean, without customers. And all the rooms so large and nothing but empty chairs."

May said she'd imagined *whipped* cream. Some of the young people began to dance, almost absentmindedly, by themselves. Regina said she was going to the ladies' room.

"But you just came back."

She said, "I want to look around. It's not often I get to places like this." She walked over to the young people at the bar and said, "Hi, are you having a good time? Nice music, isn't it?"

"It's good," said a boy.

She took her White Lady with her, and as she passed their table she raised her glass and smiled, a little greeting, a disarming, dismissive gesture. “They’re nice,” she said when she came back. “Friendly and polite. We could treat them to something. I was always getting treated when I was young.”

May said they hadn’t whipped the cream, just stirred it in. It wasn’t real Irish coffee. Now the music grew heavier, it forced itself upon them, stubbornly repeating the same phrases again and again, over and over. Ellinor said it was like a pulse.

“Then it’s someone with a bad heart,” May said. “He’s not feeling well.” She said she was going to the ladies’ room to make herself pretty.

“Drink your Irish coffee while it’s warm,” Regina said. “And you’re not going to get any prettier, neither here nor there.”

“I don’t want to drink it while it’s warm. You’re like my mother. I want to drink something clear and cold.”

Regina said, “Green, white, red, yellow! Whatever you’d like.” She laughed and threw herself back in her chair.

“Regina, you’re drunk,” Ellinor said.

Regina answered slowly. “I hadn’t expected that. I really hadn’t expected that from you. You’re usually much more subtle.”

“Girls, girls,” May burst out. “Don’t fight. Is anyone coming to the ladies’ with me?”

“Oh the ladies’ room, the eternal ladies’ room,” said Ellinor. “What do you do there all the time?” The whole scene was like something from an early talkie, with too much gesturing. It wasn’t a very good film; the direction was definitely second-rate. “Just go,” she said. “I want to look at the fog on the ceiling.”

On their way to the stairs, Regina and May stopped at the bar. “*Ciao*,” the waiter said, grinning. “What’ll it be? Irish coffee?”

“Absolutely not,” May said. She spoke with great care. “I would like a Cognac.”

The tape stopped. Outside it was pitch-dark, a great autumn darkness. They stood with their backs to the bar. Regina raised her glass and cried, “Cheers for the springtime of youth! Cheers, everyone!”

They raised their glasses to her toast. One of them stood up and came to the bar. He looked at May and asked, “Are you the lady writer?” The waiter put on a new tape, an explosion of sound. Speech was out of the question; they smiled at each other.

Ellinor appeared and shouted over the music, “What became of you? What are you doing here?”

Regina leaned towards the young man and shouted, “Here’s the author! Ellinor! You all use first names these days, right? Another Cognac. One for you, too. Isn’t this wonderful, just completely unreal? And you all dance so beautifully. This new way of dancing is so right. You just move, each person on his own. Like this . . .”

The waiter laughed. The young man put down his glass and bowed to Regina.

“Here we go!” she called out playfully, in English.

They stood and looked for a while and then May said, “She’s making a scene. Gyrating and carrying on. Ellinor, I don’t feel well.”

They went down to the ladies’ room.

“Funny,” Ellinor said. “I write books for young people and they don’t know who I am. And I know nothing about them, either. Funny, isn’t it?”

May had taken a seat in one of the chintz chairs. “What time is it?” she said. “But you don’t write anymore.”

“I don’t know. It’s stopped.”

“I admire you, but anyway . . . Listen, I can’t go in that motorboat. I don’t feel well. It was the cream.” After a while she said, “I detest Irish coffee. Have you got an aspirin?”

“No. They’re in my other purse.”

A young girl came in and went to the mirror. Ellinor asked if she had an aspirin.

“Terribly sorry,” the girl said, “but I’m afraid I don’t.” She looked at May and said, “Is it her heart?”

May said, “Certainly not. There’s nothing wrong with my heart. Anyway, I’m feeling better now.” She went into one of the stalls and slammed the door behind her.

On the stairs she said, “Why should I have a problem with my heart? If someone wants an aspirin, it’s because they’ve got a headache.”

“Don’t be angry,” Ellinor said. “It was just the lighting.”

Regina was sitting at the young people’s table. She waved them over and called out, “Hi! Come here! Guess what, Peter’s grandmother and my father knew each other! It’s a small world, isn’t it? This is Ellinor, who’s a writer, and this is May.” The

young people stood and greeted them. One of them brought two extra chairs. “Now, let’s go all in for gin!” Regina said, being playful in English again. “Ellinor? You’re not in a bad mood, I hope. This is my friend Erik. He’s just started at the university. What was it you were studying again?”

“Humanities.”

“Oh yes. Humanities. The study of mankind. God, it’s so lovely seeing nothing but pretty, friendly faces.”

“You talk too much,” Ellinor said.

The waiter turned up the music.

“Just look at these beautiful faces!” Regina cried. “I haven’t seen such beautiful faces since I was in Venice!”

The young people got up to dance, as if on some common signal. The music was deafening, thudding, without melody. They danced solemnly. Unreachable, they moved with exquisite self-control.

“Like a ritual,” Ellinor said.

“What did you say?” Regina yelled. “I can’t hear you in this racket.”

“A ritual!” Ellinor screamed. “Deadly serious. Priests and priestesses in the temple of Eros! Do you hear what I’m saying? I don’t know a thing about books for young people and I want to pay the bill and go home!”

“What are you talking about?” May said. “Now I’m feeling ill again.” But no one heard what she said. Regina shouted that she didn’t want to go home. She had made a connection with the young people and wanted to share.

“Share what, for heaven’s sake?” a weary Ellinor asked in Regina’s ear, and Regina answered, “My experience! They listen to me!”

“I’m going to kill that waiter and his grin,” said Ellinor. “Give us our bill. We’re not friendly.” He leaned over them, came so close it was hard to see what he looked like. “We can’t stay,” she said. “It’s time for us to go.”

“I’ll pay for myself!” May shouted. “One for all and all for one . . .”

They had turned out the lights in the main dining room and at the other end of the long veranda. Quick hands were stacking chairs, coming closer and closer, and now that it was dark it was even more apparent that the fog had entered the room.

“Dramatic,” Ellinor said.

The bill came almost at once. When they stood up, the music abruptly stopped. The young people were standing on the dance floor looking at them. For several moments nothing happened and the silence was absolute.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” Regina said. “It’s been wonderful.” Suddenly she was shy. “A terribly important contact.” She spoke slowly, with quiet dignity. “I’m certain that you’ve given my friend Ellinor many new ideas, and your charming thoughtfulness has made a deep impression on me, on us. And now we want to give you our best wishes for long lives and the best of everything.”

The young man named Peter took several quick steps forward and kissed her hand. All the way down the stairs, the music was silent. Only when they were walking across the lawn did it come back in all its uncontrollable but now distant vitality.

Regina was crying. “Wasn’t it wonderful?” she said. “Wasn’t that simply wonderful? It was like in Venice. Do you know what he said to me? He’d taken me back to my hotel, a squalid little place, but I thought it was splendid, and his stomach was hurting him the whole time, and then he said, ‘Dear, sweet girl, if I’d been thirty years younger, our evening would have ended in a different way.’ Wasn’t that too bad? You understand, he was really having trouble with his stomach. And the next morning he sent roses, dozens of roses, the first flowers anyone ever sent me.”

“I understand,” Ellinor said. “But now you need to pull yourself together. The boat’s coming.”

“Look!” May cried. “There it comes. Isn’t it like Charon’s ferry or something? You like similes.”

“By all means,” Ellinor said. She was tired and in no mood for anyone’s similes but her own.

Translated by Thomas Teal

THE DOLL'S HOUSE

ALEXANDER was an upholsterer of the old school. He was exceptionally skilled, and he took a craftsman's natural pride in his work. He discussed commissions only with those customers who had taste and a feel for the beauty of materials and workmanship. Not wishing to show his contempt, he referred all the others to his employees.

His workshop was old. It lay in a cellar, down a flight of stairs from the pavement, but it was quite large. He was never short of work. Alexander himself took responsibility for ornamentation in wood and for difficult upholstering. Simpler jobs he assigned to others. There were still some people who wanted handcrafted decoration—there weren't many, but they existed. They could be very particular about, say, the choice of wallpapers. Alexander gave them time. He conducted long, detailed discussions about the right background for period furniture. Occasionally he left the shop to attend auctions or to browse the best antique shops, and wherever he went, whether to buy or, with his silence, to reject, he was an honored guest. The most beautiful pieces found their way to his apartment, a place very few people had visited. It lay on a quiet street in the southern part of the city. For twenty years, Alexander had shared the apartment with his friend Erik, and both men had the same respect for the lovely objects that time and Alexander's insight had gathered around them.

Sometimes Alexander would sit and read while at work. He read the classics, the French and the German among others, but primarily the Russian, which enchanted him with their heavy patience. They gave him a sense of the ineluctable constancy of things. With his thick eyebrows furrowed and his short, powerful body expressing concentration and voluntary solitude, he read during working hours and no one dared disturb him.

When Alexander retired, he sold his workshop judiciously and after mature reflection. He took with him quite a number of product samples of various kinds—old-fashioned tassels and braiding, books of wallpapers and ornamentation. Most of it was

quite dated, but it had a beauty few people could see. At about the same time, Erik retired from the bank. They put Alexander's samples in a cupboard and drank champagne to celebrate their new freedom.

It was difficult in the beginning. They weren't used to spending their days together with nothing to do, and it all felt wrong. Erik's eyes ached from watching television, and Alexander was most interested in Russian films. They bought a stereo and listened their way gropingly through piles of cassettes and LPs that they had purchased quite possibly because of an attractive jacket. Their friends Jani and Pekka gave them tips, and they admired the music but didn't like it, at least not enough that they longed to hear it.

"Turn it off," Alexander said. "I can't read." But in fact he didn't care about reading as much as he once had. Perhaps books had tantalized him only as a stolen luxury in the middle of a working day.

"You're not turning the pages," Erik said. "Are you unhappy about something?" His voice was always the same—low, gentle, thoughtful. His strong eyeglasses reflected the light and hid the expression in his eyes.

"No," Alexander said. "I'm not unhappy. Leave it on if you want."

"No," Erik said. "I don't think I do."

Erik did the cleaning. He polished the furniture, and every morning he ran his vacuum over the rugs. The mornings were best. They threw open all the windows, and, while they drank their morning coffee and shared the newspaper, Erik planned lunch and dinner, sometimes asking Alexander for advice. Alexander would laugh and say, "You decide. Surprise me. I've never been disappointed." Erik went to the shop on the corner or to the covered market, which was farther away. Sometimes they'd have Jani and Pekka for supper and play the stereo. But there were always the long days.

It was sometime in September that Alexander began work on the doll's house. That is to say, he didn't know it would become a doll's house. He made a little oval table in mahogany with a carved base and then two Victorian chairs that he covered in red velvet.

Erik said, "They're tiny and yet completely accurate. I don't

understand how you do it. But we don't know any children."

"What do you mean?" Alexander said.

"I mean, what are you going to do with them?"

"I just made them," Alexander replied. "How about some coffee?"

He made a cabinet with glass doors. He made an étagère with hand-carved knobs. The parlor table where he worked was covered with newspapers, and Erik vacuumed the rugs twice a day. Finally they agreed that Alexander would move his toys out to the kitchen. Every morning after coffee in the parlor, he went straight out to the kitchen and went to work. He made an upholstered sofa and a little bed of thin brass tubing with round knobs. There was a moment when he thought he'd let Erik make the mattress, but mattresses are precise and difficult things. Erik was all thumbs when it came to anything other than numbers and housekeeping. So Alexander said nothing and made the mattress himself.

He made more and more furniture, more and more exquisite parlor furniture, kitchen furniture, veranda furniture, and, finally, old-fashioned furniture to store in the attic or hide away on a staircase. Alexander constructed all of it with the same loving care and attention. He made windows. French windows, attic windows, Carelian gingerbread windows, stupid ordinary windows—every sort. And doors. Complex or very simple doors, Wild West doors, and classic Greek portals.

Erik said, "I understand the furniture, but why are you making doors and windows? They don't lead anywhere. And why can't you clean up after yourself when you're done?"

"That's an idea," Alexander said. "I've got an idea." And he left everything where it was and went into the parlor and turned on the stereo. "This is lovely music," he said, but he wasn't listening.

"Turn it off!" Erik cried, and Alexander turned it off and went on thinking. He was imagining a house, the ultimate house. But he'd make no blueprints. The house would be allowed to grow however it wished, organically, room by room. The natural thing would be to start with the cellar. Alexander gathered materials. He went out to an abandoned stonemasonry at the edge of town and collected pretty shards of stone for the foundation. He assembled lumber—aspen, balsa, and pine—and he filled the kitchen cabinets with bottles and jars containing various glues,

paints, and solvents. He was more and more in the way. Erik said the kitchen was not a hobby room, it was impossible to run the house without space to work in, and he didn't want sawdust in the food. They agreed to divide the kitchen in two with a partition that reached almost to the ceiling. The window was on Erik's side, but Alexander bought some powerful lighting. He also managed to maneuver a workbench into his cubicle. The kitchen cabinet on his side had to be emptied, and all its china was piled on improvised shelves in the kitchen. Alexander spent a long time arranging his tools lovingly in the cabinet, each tool easy to reach in its own appropriate place. He built the cellar and began on a miniature woodworking shop. In the middle of the wall dividing their kitchen, Alexander had built a little window, and from time to time he would look out and say, "Hi, what's for lunch?" Or Erik would look in and say, "What are you making now?" And Alexander would carefully place the world's smallest finishing plane in Erik's hand to be admired and remarked upon.

When finished, the miniature woodshop was very small, with a sloping roof. Alexander had built it with bleached wood and taken great pains to give it a window with dirty panes that were broken in just the right way. It had a tree stump for chopping wood and a workbench with tiny tools, each of them exact to the tiniest detail. He had never before felt such peace of mind. He liked the quiet. Sometimes the telephone would ring out in the apartment, as if in another world.

"That was Jani and Pekka on the phone. We should have them to dinner sometime soon."

"Yes, of course," Alexander answered. "As soon as I've finished the woodshop." He sat up half of every night, having fun, never turning on the television. He ate too fast and went back to his cubby as quickly as he could. Erik bought new cassettes and turned up the volume louder and louder. When Alexander came into the bedroom at night, he was preoccupied and happy and fell asleep at once. Early in the morning, he was back at work. He took his coffee through the window.

"But where are you?" Erik said. He pushed a cup of coffee and some sandwiches across the windowsill. Alexander caught a glimpse of his troubled face and long nose, but his glasses turned his eyes to empty mirrors.

"What did you say?" he asked.

“Where are you? Where are you these days?”

“On the second floor,” Alexander said. “I’m up in the kitchen. The trapdoor in the floor is really a challenge. It has to meet the cellar stairs.”

“Of course,” said Erik.

“What do you mean, ‘of course’? In that tone of voice.”

Erik was silent. Then he said, “It was nothing. What does it look like, the trapdoor?”

Alexander showed him. The trapdoor was laid in the kitchen floor with miniature hinges, while a thin chain prevented it from falling open. The stairway down to the cellar, meticulously mounted, disappeared in darkness.

“It’s lovely,” Erik said. “Where did you get this doll’s house idea?”

“It’s not a doll’s house,” Alexander said immediately. “It’s a house.”

“Who for?”

“Just a house. Maybe for us. I’m building everything exactly the way I want it. I decide. The first and second stories are by the sea. Then comes the parlor.”

“Where?”

Alexander laughed a little. “Somewhere in Germany. The attic will be in Paris. We’ll see.”

Erik looked into the kitchen. “It has a wood stove.”

“Of course. It’s prettier.”

“Good lord,” Erik said. “I can’t imagine cooking on a wood stove. It’s impossible. Not when you’re used to a modern kitchen.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Alexander said.

He never swept his workshop. Wood curls and sawdust and stone dust lay like a thick fur rug on the floor, and he liked standing in this soft soil his work had created and letting it grow thicker and deeper around him. He trailed it over the rest of the apartment and Erik had to vacuum several times a day.

When the kitchen ceiling was finished, Alexander began thinking about electric lights. The house should definitely have electricity. He bought materials, thin copper wire, fixtures, and flashlight batteries, and spent a lot of time wiring the first and second stories. It was not a success. He had to remove the wiring in the kitchen ceiling, and he damaged the stairs in the process.

Erik thought the house could be lit just as well from the outside.

"Out of the question," Alexander said. "This house has to glow, it has to live from the inside, don't you see? We're there inside, and other people walk by outside. But these batteries aren't worth a damn. Or else there's something wrong with the wiring."

In the end he called Jani. Jani had an electrician friend called Boy. Boy came and had a look. "You've got to get rid of all this junk," he said. "It's never going to work. You're going to need a transformer on the bottom floor." He explained in detail. They were absorbed in their electrical discussions all evening and went on planning during supper.

"This will be a piece of cake," Boy said. "You haven't got a clue, but I'll teach you. I'll get it working. But you're going to have to take up that middle floor again because of the wiring. You're a wonderful carpenter, but you don't know a damn thing about electricity."

Boy came back almost every evening. He often brought little table lamps, sconces, or a chandelier that he'd found in some hobby shop or toy store. He came straight from work in his jeans and trailed street dirt over the rugs, but Alexander didn't seem to notice—he just admired whatever Boy had brought with him and listened gravely to his suggestions about improvements to the house.

"You should realize," Boy said, "that this house is going to be famous. But whatever you build, it's the lighting that's going to make it sing. Believe me."

Boy was a little, skinny fellow. He looked and moved a bit like a squirrel. He laughed often, showing his gums all the way to the roof of his mouth, and he clapped them both chummily on the back. Erik detested being clapped on the back, especially by such a small man wearing boots with high heels. When Boy came, the three of them would sit in the parlor and talk for a while, about whatever, about nothing, the way people do when they're ready to leave but want to round things off to be polite. And then Alexander would stand up and say maybe they should get started and he'd go into his little cubbyhole with Boy. The tone of their voices changed, grew quieter and calmer, and the pauses grew longer. They stood and thought, considering some problematic detail in their construction project. From electrical, they had moved on to concern themselves with the uprights in a bay

window and the construction of a spiral staircase. Out in the kitchen, Erik was preparing supper. The window to the cubby was closed on account of the sawdust, so he could only hear their voices, not what they were saying. But in their exchange of practical questions and suggestions, he could hear a quiet and complete harmony of purpose. Often these unheard, intermittent conversations were like breezes passing through foliage—strengthening, fading, stopping, then quickening again. From time to time, Boy would laugh, the way a person laughs when something finally fits.

By December, Alexander had reached the parlor. He made French windows and put different colors of cellophane in the complex pattern of panes. Erik went into the cubicle and said, "About the cellar. I was cleaning the medicine cabinet and found some little bottles that are empty. We could put jam in them. You know, something we could color red. And then cover them with paper and put on labels."

"Excellent!" Alexander exclaimed. "Great idea! You can use plaster. I'll show you how to mix it."

Erik set to work on his jam jars on the kitchen counter. He did a fine job, and each time he finished a jar and had written a label, he would take it to the window and get it approved. Finally Alexander said that now they had enough jam jars, and when they went on coming he was irritated. "We're in the middle of a really difficult bit right now," he said. "We don't have time for jam jars. Can't you find something else to do?"

Erik walked straight out of the kitchen and turned on the television in the parlor. It was a lecture about the metal industry. After a while, Alexander came after him and said that the cellar needed some apples. But not too many. They could probably be made from clay, but don't make the clay too wet and hard to handle. Erik's apples weren't great, and neither were his cucumbers, bananas, and melons. But when they'd been painted and piled out of the way behind the cellar stairs, it didn't much matter.

The house rose higher and higher. It had reached the attic, now, and had grown more and more fantastic. Alexander was in love, almost obsessed, with the thing he was trying to create. When he woke up in the morning, his first thought was The House, and he was instantly occupied with the solution to some

problem of framing or a difficult staircase or the spire on a tower. Never before had he felt so light and free. Even his night thoughts, in the past often burdened with anxiety or self-reproach, had changed. He had only to close his eyes and walk into his house and see that everything was as it should be. In his imagination, critical faculties sharpened to their limit, he would walk attentively from room to room, up stairways, out onto balconies; he would examine every detail and see that each was completed and that the whole was astonishingly beautiful. He saw the tower that would ultimately rise above his work and crown it triumphantly. Sometimes at night he would get up, very quietly so as not to wake Erik, and sneak into the kitchen, into his cubby. He would turn on a flashlight, sit on a kitchen chair, and look. He'd shine the flashlight through one window after another as if it were moonshine or the beam of a lighthouse. Alexander was in the grip of a passion for perfection. He was not aware of how closely, how perilously, perfectionism and fanaticism are related.

Erik was allowed to sand window frames and paint them white. Once he tried to hang wallpaper on a landing, but it wrinkled and had to be pulled off.

When the elaborate attic story began taking shape, The House was nearly two meters tall and would no longer fit in Alexander's cubby. Alexander and Boy had a long talk and decided the only alternative was to empty the bedroom.

"It'll fit exactly," Alexander said. "We can put the workbench under the window. And it won't fit in the parlor."

"Which parlor?" Erik said. "Yours or mine?"

"What's your problem?" Alexander said. "What are you angry about? This is important. We're about to start on the tower." He borrowed two collapsible camp beds and put them in the hall. They lifted the big double bed in the bedroom and leaned it against the wall. The House was moved with infinite care and placed on a modeling stand with a revolving top. Now, in full daylight, The House changed character. The dreamlike quality was replaced by a bewildering impression of lifelikeness. The flat winter light filled every room. The pillars and the long balustrade on the open gallery threw pale gray shadows that were real, and the green, red, and blue panes in the windows cast soft rainbows on the floor. Every detail, every article of furniture, became

convincing, as if they had all stood in place for generations. Alexander rotated The House slowly on its platform.

"And now," he said, "now we've come to the attic. Now we build our tower."

Boy said, "The cupola won't be easy. It'll have to be asymmetrical. Otherwise we won't have room for the tower and the new gallery."

"True," said Alexander. "We've got our work cut out for us. Which room do you think we should make smaller?"

"The bedroom. We'll have to make it a lot smaller."

"That's wrong!" Erik said. "Completely wrong. I don't agree at all. The bedroom's already too small, and the window's too high!"

"About the cupola," Alexander went on. "You may be right that we could make it asymmetrical."

"Yes," Boy said. "I mean, so we'll have room for our gallery." And they bent over the workbench and started sketching the tricky section of the roof.

That evening, Erik had not prepared any supper. He said he had a headache. They could make something themselves or eat something cold from the pantry.

"Did you take an aspirin?" Alexander asked.

"Yes, of course," Erik said. He was lying on the sofa in the parlor, staring at the ceiling with his feet on the armrest. And he hadn't taken off his shoes. Alexander went for a blanket. "Lift your feet," he said, and he put a newspaper over the arm of the sofa.

The next day, Alexander suggested that Erik sew curtains for The House, even though he knew that Erik had never sewn and couldn't even hem a tablecloth.

The winter wore on and The House rose higher and higher. Alexander and Boy had moved beyond the cupola and were working on the highest tower, where they were planning a rotating beacon. Their Black & Deckers ran every evening, an infernal shrieking of electric saws and drills in the bedroom, interrupted by periodic silence. Erik sat and watched television. Sometimes he went to the local cinema. Alexander asked if he couldn't go and visit Jani and Pekka or some of their other friends, but Erik didn't want to. "Anyway," he said, "it's our turn to invite them."

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Alexander, “but not until The House is finished. Then they can come and look. I’ve told you, we can’t be disturbed while we’re building.”

Boy didn’t seem to notice that anything was wrong. He was cheerful and chatty at mealtimes and completely occupied with getting the beacon to rotate.

One evening when Alexander had gone to the station to buy cigarettes, Boy threw open the door to the parlor and shouted, “It’s going around! It’s rotating! We’ve done it!”

Erik turned off the television. In the darkened room he walked slowly towards Boy and then past him into the bedroom, where the only lights were in The House, lamps burning on every floor. From the final, topmost tower, red and green lights swept across the walls of the bedroom in a steady rhythm.

“We did it!” Boy shouted, laughing out loud. “Alexander and me! We made it work. We’ve topped off the house and the beacon’s working just the way it should. Well? What do you think of our house?”

“It’s not yours,” said Erik very softly.

“Oh yes it is,” Boy said. “It sure is! You’d better believe it is! Come and look from the other side. Come look at the way the lights reflect in the bedroom mirrors!” When Erik didn’t move, he took him by the arm.

“Don’t touch me!” Erik shouted.

“Don’t be silly,” Boy said, and gave him a slap on the back. Erik screamed—a little, squeaky scream. Fumbling on the workbench he grabbed a tool, something that felt hard and cold in his hand, and he flew at Boy and struck at him blindly. The drill bit hit him near the ear and angled down towards his shoulder, and Boy threw himself back against the doll’s house, which tottered for a moment and seesawed on its podium. The beacon continued to rotate. Boy jumped behind the doll’s house and yelled, “Stop that, for Christ’s sake! Have you lost your mind?”

Erik pursued him step by step. It was hard for him to see, and the moving beacon distorted the room and made it seem strange. He stumbled. Boy was silent.

“I know where you are,” Erik said. “You’re hiding behind the doll’s house.” He gripped the drill shaft harder and went after him. “I’m coming,” he said. “And this time I won’t miss.”

“Jesus Christ! Leave me alone,” Boy said. He was trapped in a corner of the room and couldn’t get away. “What do you want?”

Erik began to tremble. All he knew was that he had to strike out, just once, one time, but hard. There was something wrong with his glasses, all he could see was the beacon fluttering round and round. “Turn off that damned light,” he screamed.

Boy didn’t move.

“Turn it off so I can see you, or I’ll smash the whole tower to pieces!” He took one step towards Boy and said, “Shall I smash you or the tower?” By now he was shaking so hard he could barely stand. “Shall I smash you to pieces? Is it you I should smash?”

“No,” Boy said. “Not me.”

Erik took off his glasses. They were in the way—they’d fogged up and made it hard to see. The everyday act of taking off his glasses and stuffing them in his pocket altered everything, inexplicably. A great weariness swept over him, and he said, “Could you go turn on the overhead light? There’s something wrong with my glasses.”

When the light came on, he put the drill handle back on the workbench. Boy put his fingers carefully to his ear and looked at his hand. “Blood,” he said. “It’s running down on my collar.”

Erik sat down on the floor. He felt ill.

They heard the front door open. A few moments later, Alexander came in, stopped in the doorway, and said, “What the hell’s going on in here?”

“He hit me,” Boy said. “Look! Blood!”

“Erik?” said Alexander. “Why are you sitting on the floor? Where are your glasses?”

“In my pocket. I feel sick.”

“What have you done?”

“I don’t know,” Erik said. “But I saved our tower. It’s all in one piece.”

Slowly, Alexander opened a pack of cigarettes, took one out, and lit it. “It actually rotates,” he said. “You know your stuff, Boy. Now the whole thing’s perfect. No one’s ever built such a house as Erik’s and mine.”

Translated by Thomas Teal

A LEADING ROLE

IT WAS the biggest part she'd ever been given, but it didn't suit her, it didn't speak to her. An insignificant, anxious, middle-aged woman, an obliterated creature without any personality whatsoever! She had one good scene in the third act, but the rest of it! A shadow—to play a shadow in her first leading role. She called Sanderson and said, "It's Maria. I've read through the part and I think it's lifeless. Maybe it's literature, but it's not theater."

"I knew you'd say that," Sanderson replied. "I've been waiting for you to call. Now listen to me. This is your big chance, and you're going to take it. And it *is* theater, great theater."

"Oh, really," she said. "I'm so glad you told me. It's one of his short stories that he's rehashed into a play. But he can't write for the stage."

"You're going to have to let us decide that," Sanderson said. He was determined to take no nonsense from Maria. She was professional and she could take direction, but there wasn't a whole lot more to her than that, which she ought to understand herself. He said, "You can count on the director. Go through the play again and call me. We need to make a decision this week to get the autumn season set."

Two days later, Maria Mickelson called and accepted the part.

It was early summer, and she had driven out to their country house to open it for the season. The weather was dreadful, an ice-cold fog as gray and impenetrable as the role of Ellen. Down by the dock, the reeds vanished out into the empty nothingness of the lake, and the spruce trees were black with moisture. The fog forced its way into the house, and the fire wouldn't burn. She let it all go, poured herself a drink, and sat down on the sofa with her coat around her shoulders. The whole house was a mistake. It was too big, it had never been modernized, and it was too far from town. But Hans was fond of it—childhood home, and all that. Fishing on the weekends, dinner and sauna with his friends from the office. Jovial chatter with the local boatmen and fishermen. So how was your winter? Getting any whitefish in

your nets? Doesn't that look like a storm off to the southwest?

She had spoken to him. "Don't you see how isolated we're going to be? I'm not interested in fishing, or gardening either. And there aren't any neighbors to socialize with." And he said, "Why not invite someone you like to come and stay? Someone from the theater? One of your relatives? You know such an awful lot of people." It was true. But she didn't much care for them. They were all right in the city, but not at close quarters in a summer house. She had tried. And every time it was a relief when they finally left. Relatives were out of the question—childish, middle-class mediocrities who admired her, vaguely, without a clue about her actual work. It must be wonderful to be an actress! What an exciting life! I could just *never* appear on stage! Learning all those lines by heart! . . . Only her cousin Frida was quiet. Quiet and adoring. A gray little mouse with frightened eyes.

Maria pulled her coat tighter about her shoulders and raised her glass. And at that moment it came to her, a perfectly simple, straightforward insight. She put her glass down again and sat quite still. Cousin Frida. Cousin Frida was the consummate model for the role of Ellen. She *was* Ellen. Her gestures, her walk, the way she held her head, her voice, all of it! Maria Mickelson laughed out loud, finished her drink, and stood up. She walked to the mirror and studied herself, her well-groomed regular features, and the first, fine network of lines that middle age had drawn about her eyes and mouth. A new hairdo, gray-brown and badly cut, like Frida's . . . shoulders drawn up, nervous hands . . . How was it Frida moved her hands, that furtive, automatic gesture towards her mouth? And her way of holding a glass? Sitting down in a chair?

How would this sound? Dear cousin Frida, it's altogether too long since we last spoke. My dear, we mustn't just let time go by and lose touch. But now I've had a wonderful idea that I hope you'll agree to. Couldn't you take some time off work and come out here for a week or so? Everything's start*ing* to b*loo*m, and it will be warm soon . . .

But the warm weather didn't come. The fog lay just as tight around the house when Frida arrived. Maria paid close attention to her cautious way of stepping off the bus, her exaggerated

gratitude when the driver helped her with her bag. Her clothes were right, in fact perfect. Not too unpretentious. There was an actual attempt at a modest elegance—a misguided attempt.

I'll skip the glasses, she thought, that would be overkill. But I can keep the way she peeks over them. I can use that.

"Welcome," she said. "It's been much too long. Let me take your suitcase. It's not far . . ."

"No, by no means," Frida exclaimed. "What an idea!" She was obviously nervous. "It was so nice of you to invite me," she said. "You have so many friends."

The spruce forest was very dark, the trees closing them in on every side.

I need to write down my observations. Even the tiniest ones; they're the most important. Every day.

She said, "Let's see how you like your room. It looks out on the lake. It's still a bit chilly, but I've laid a fire."

"How kind," Frida said. "But you really mustn't go to any trouble, I don't usually mind the cold . . . I mean, generally . . ." An unfinished sentence, voice trailing off to silence.

"It'll be fine," Maria said. "I'm so truly pleased you could come."

The house was white with a black roof, tall and rather narrow, with steep stairs leading up to a long veranda. In bad weather, pressed against a wall of spruce, it was a gloomy house. In front of the veranda, the ground sloped down towards the dock and the water.

"Is that really the ocean?" cousin Frida asked shyly, squinting into the fog. "I've never stayed right beside the real ocean."

"The open water's farther out," Maria explained. "But our bay is quite large. The boat's being repaired. As soon as it warms up a bit, Hans will bring it out."

"But, now in the fog, it's almost like the open ocean anyway," her cousin said and smiled. Her smile radiated a great, relaxed friendliness and altered her entire face. She turned around and contemplated the house, holding her suitcase in front of her with both hands.

"The house doesn't look its best at the moment," Maria said, suddenly irritated. "It's really made for big parties. You should see it when we have guests, with lamps in all the windows and

lanterns over the veranda and all the way down to the dock! It's all so lively and jolly . . . boats coming and going, sometimes all the way from Sweden."

Frida nodded eagerly. She looked almost frightened.

What in the world's come over me? Am I trying to impress her? So stupid . . .

"It's cold out here," Maria said. "Come on, let's go in. You've had a long trip."

Of course I could have picked her up in the car. But why? She would only have been embarrassed.

A fire was burning in the fireplace. Some lamps were lit in the early dusk, shaded circles of light making the room's colors soft and warm. The low table covered with bottles and glasses stood in front of the fire. Frida stopped in the doorway and looked around in silence. She took several steps and paused by a vase of yellow roses. "Flowers," she said. "I should have brought flowers. I thought of it, but then . . ." Her voice sank and trailed away.

Maria studied her, fascinated. "I'll show you your room," she said. "You'll want to hang up your clothes. Then we'll have a drink before dinner."

Maria Mickelson was an accomplished hostess, accustomed to filling pauses in the conversation. She did it spontaneously, without the least effort. Her guest ate very little. She listened with her eyes fixed on Maria's face, and gradually her smile came back and her stiff posture grew more relaxed. She no longer resembled Ellen quite so much. Maria noticed this and went quiet, a politely challenging silence. Let it be quiet—she'll just have to manage on her own. I've talked enough.

It had started to rain outside, and the rain rustled softly on the metal roof. Maria waited. She saw Frida shrink and grow anxious, fumble with her food, search desperately for something to say. Finally it came, quickly and too loud. "I saw you in your last play."

"Yes?"

"You were wonderful. Your acting is so . . . natural."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do."

"That's so nice to hear," Maria said and let the silence fall again.

Frida's face was red. She picked up her wineglass and took a big drink, her hand shaking.

I need to remember that her back is straight while her shoulders are thrust forward and upward. And that movement of her neck, as if her collar were choking her. That will be good. She asked, mercifully, "Do you go the theater often?"

"Yes," Frida answered. "But mostly when you're in the play." The smile again. A great, sincere admiration. It was hard not to like cousin Frida. Of course she was very irritating and would be a catastrophe combined with other guests, but there was something about her that was very disarming, something that had been frightened into hiding and become almost invisible. It peeked out only in her smile.

After dinner, she wanted to do the dishes. She insisted, pleaded, and, when Maria finally gave in, her gratitude was almost embarrassing. Cousin Frida changed completely as soon as she had something to do. She moved quickly, calmly, matter-of-factly in the unfamiliar kitchen and in an odd way seemed to find everything she needed.

"It will be such fun to help out," she said. "I'm a good cook. And I love laying fires and getting them to burn with *one* match. I get up early in the mornings. Do you prefer coffee or tea?"

Maria sat on the firewood box and smoked. The kitchen had suddenly changed; become friendly and secure.

"Just think, here I am in the country," Frida said. "And with you. I never dreamed. It's all such an adventure."

Later that evening, when Maria was alone in her room, she took out a notebook and wrote a couple of pages. She tried to remember every nuance of gesture and voice, every glance, every pause. She rehearsed them in the mirror. They worked. They'd be perfect. The hand that covered the mouth, the taut neck . . . She tried to borrow Frida's smile, but without success. Her smile was entirely her own.

Letting Frida take charge of the house had been a mistake. She resembled Ellen less and less. She escaped her mute helplessness by chatting about domestic details, always in motion, arranging, preparing dinners, sweeping pine needles from the veranda,

raking leaves, polishing pots, carrying wood. And every time she had accomplished something and came to report, there was that brown canine gaze, submissive but expectant. Cousin Frida awaited praise. Maria had no use for her any longer. After a couple of days she called Hans and asked him to send out Mrs. Hermanson. “I know,” Maria said. “She wasn’t supposed to come until later. But I need a little help around the house. Can’t you eat out this week?”

“I suppose I can,” said Hans, who was a kind man. “How’s it going with your cousin?”

“Good,” Maria said. “Inviting her was a good idea.”

Mrs. Hermanson arrived and took over the kitchen, the fireplaces, the cleaning, everything. And Frida crept back into the role ordained for her. In the evenings, they sat in front of the fire and Maria was very quiet. She watched her cousin.

“I happened to think of something,” Frida said. “Do you have anything that needs fixing?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, I just thought . . . The fog hasn’t let up.”

“No.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t ask,” Frida said, very quietly, “but are you working on a part right at the moment? I mean, a new play . . . ?”

“Yes,” Maria said. “There’s a part coming up in the autumn. A leading role.”

“Oh. That’s your first real lead.”

“I suppose,” said Maria, growing annoyed. “If you like.” She leaned forward and stirred the fire. “How did you know that?” she asked over her shoulder.

Frida didn’t answer right away; she was frightened. After a while she said, “I clip all the stories about you. And it seems to me the parts they give you are too small. And they don’t write what they should. They really don’t.”

Maria stood up and walked over to the drinks table. She poured herself a drink and drank it standing, staring at the rainy veranda windows.

“Did I say something wrong?” said Frida, her voice barely audible.

“How so?” Maria walked back to the fire, her voice very chilly. She was suddenly tired of her experiment. “I just can’t

understand," she said. "I just can't understand why Hans wants to keep this pile of a house. It's so utterly boring. And the evenings are worst."

Frida crept up in her chair.

That's good. Let her think it's all her fault. Just like Ellen. In the second act, when she doesn't even understand that they're being mean to her . . .

Maria sat down slowly and stretched her hands towards the fire. "Of course," she said, "of course I could get him to sell the place and buy something smaller and more modern, closer to town. But I think maybe my conscience would bother me . . ." She turned quickly to Frida and said, "Do you ever have a bad conscience?"

"Oh yes." Her answer was hardly more than a sigh.

"Often?"

"I don't know . . . Maybe all the time. Somehow . . ." Her hands were folded over her stomach as if she were in pain, her chin down, her face rigid and turned away.

"But you're such a nice person. What can you possibly have done to give you a bad conscience?"

"That's just it," Frida said. She'd gone pale. "I've never done a thing, nothing at all, nothing one way or the other."

"Why not?" Maria stared at her intently.

"Maybe I never dared . . . I don't know . . ."

Mrs. Hermanson came in and drew the curtains, locked the veranda door, and said good night. They heard her steps in the kitchen and doors closing. Maria poured a little glass of straight whiskey. "Take this," she said. "Drink it straight down like medicine. You'll feel better."

Frida stared at the glass, reached out her hand, and suddenly began to cry in long, labored sobs. "Forgive me," she sobbed. "This is just terrible . . . I'm so embarrassed . . . But you're so kind, I don't understand how you can be so nice to me . . ."

Maria waited, her face expressionless. When the attack had passed, she said, "Now drink that down. And then we'll go to bed. You're tired, that's all. Take an aspirin before you go to sleep."

The fog had lifted and the summer night was now a deep blue. Maria lay in bed reading slowly through her script. With great

care she read through cousin Frida's lines and brought them to life, one after another, with relentless attention to detail. It was a good part, very good. But it was difficult. It was only now she understood that the woman she was to play was not only submissive and insignificant; she also possessed a quality people seldom call by name—natural goodness. The quality that filled Frida's smile but that she had never been allowed to pour forth—a confined and strangled generosity.

But how does cousin Frida live? What does she do? I know nothing about her . . .

Maria's thoughts began to wander, and she set the script aside. At once, the silence in the house tightened around her and in vague unease she got up and opened the door to the stairs. No streak of light under the guest-room door. Frida was asleep. Or was she lying awake weeping? Maria walked to the door and listened. No, nothing. It was a relief.

Too bad, actually, that she had felt it necessary to call for Mrs. Hermanson. Well, well. She could ask cousin Frida to mend some sheets. Not tomorrow, maybe. But soon. And maybe tell her some stories, some theater stories. Everyone always seemed to like those.

Translated by Thomas Teal

THE LOCOMOTIVE

WHAT I am about to write may seem exaggerated, but the cornerstone of what I have to relate is really my single-minded devotion to objectivity. In truth, I am not telling a story, I am recounting facts. I am known for my detachment and precision. And what I am trying to convey is intended for me alone, to help me make sense of certain events.

This is difficult to write, I don't know where to begin. Perhaps with some facts. I am an expert mechanical draftsman and have worked for United Railways all my life. My drawings are very precise and skillful. For many years I have also acted as a secretary—a subject I will return to. My story has a great deal to do with locomotives.

(I am fond of lovely old words like "locomotive.") Naturally I often draw details of this particular machine as a part of my job, and in doing this work I am a model of calm, professional pride, but in the evenings, when I come home to my apartment, I draw machines in motion, locomotives in particular. I do this for my amusement. It is a hobby, not to be confused with an ambition. Over the last few years, I have drawn and colored a whole series of such illustrations and sometimes I think they could be made into a book. But I am not finished yet and won't be for a long time to come. When I retire, I intend to devote all of my time to the locomotive, or, rather, to the idea of the locomotive. At the moment, I am forced to write, every day, in order to clarify this. The drawings are not enough.

A very long time ago, I used to walk to school by way of the railway terminal. It was a long walk, and I seem to remember that it was always terribly cold, but I walked as slowly as I could because that route was the best and most vivid part of my entire day. I told myself stories. And when I got to the warmth of the railway terminal I would often finish off a chapter right then and there. That is, I would save a high point, an unbearably exciting moment, for the minutes I would linger at the entrance to the platforms with the locomotives before my very eyes. Then I

would let it happen.

They were enormous, coal black, trimmed in brass, green, and red. Sometimes they would roll in with a screech in a thick plume of smoke, or they would glide slowly away from the platform, gathering strength and gaining speed, pistons working like great muscles. That was beautiful. Or they would just stand there breathing their white breath into the winter cold, panting with exhaustion and satisfaction after their long journeys. They had a wonderful strength, but they were tired. Nowadays, engines carry no fire in their bellies.

Obviously—it's important to point this out—obviously I could have taken the trolley to school, and of course I had good, warm, well-made clothing. I was not badly treated either at school or at home. But when I try to remember, I recall no other reality than those long walks, telling myself stories with an excitement that reached its climax at the railway terminal. Sometimes I was the engineer, driving thousands of helpless people through the night, increasing the speed, stoking the fire like a madman, blowing the whistle, the passengers growing increasingly alarmed, stumbling through the violently shaking cars to find the conductor, shouting, "What's wrong? What's happened?" And the conductor, pale as a ghost, answering, "God help us all, the machine is out of control, something has happened to the brakes . . ."

Sometimes I was a ship's captain, and I'd let the steamer brush against a reef, an iceberg, and everything and everyone on board would quake with fear for one long, anxious second and then, with a dreadful grating sound like that of tearing metal, the ship would continue on its way. But for how long? Only I knew. I was the emperor, with the power of life and death. I closed schools, I forbade entire populations to bear children. It was a splendid game—one game in the morning on the way to school and another on the way home. Everything else passed unnoticed, like time, and I remember very little. But my games gradually grew more refined and, at the same time, simpler. No one knew who I was—that was tremendously important. They never guessed who it was that walked among them, doing the same things they did at the same times of the day. How strong I must have been. I will write no more today.

Later. I have a very nice apartment—living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, and workroom. In the workroom I've had

shelves built for my illustrations, but it is in no sense an atelier—I must emphasize that point. It is, rather, a professional library. The word “atelier” unavoidably conveys an impression of picturesque romantic squalor. Nothing could be more alien to me. But a workroom is simply a room where a person works, a space for a person’s vocational materials. I have never shown anyone my locomotive art.

I eat out but make my own tea in the mornings and evenings. My apartment is very quiet. Sometimes when I’m having my evening tea I get the odd feeling that I don’t exist, almost as if I had never existed. This is one of those details that writing may help me to explain. I need to write every day and I must always take great pains to be precise. For that matter, it is a part of my job. I have been accused of being standoffish, of never showing my face. This has happened several times. But what gives them the right to see my face? I don’t know what they expect of me, but, whatever it is, they have no right to it.

Later. Perhaps I should use the third-person singular instead. “He” is more objective than “I.” It seems to me.

So, he had never shown anyone his locomotive art. In his job as secretary and technical draftsman (I am now repeating myself, but I do so intentionally) at United Railways, at professional conferences, when delivering drawings, at lunches, etc. , he came into contact with quite a few people, often people who talked openly and seemed to be in no hurry. He soon noticed that, unlike himself, they revealed themselves freely. He gradually discovered that he could make use of their openness. Afterwards, when he came home to his apartment and continued with the work he called his own—the locomotive illustrations—he found it easier to depict the strength, the motion, the sovereign power of the machine.

At home, of course, he never received visitors. The apartment was utterly his own.

In the beginning, he just listened, very attentively. Later he learned to ask the right questions, to entice his interlocutors to speak of what mattered to them most in the world. This was not usually difficult, especially at a lunch or an office party. He waited patiently. He probed his way forward with questions and very soon arrived at what they really cared about, what they hoped for or feared. With infinite care, he led them on. It was a

kind of game or, shall we say, a hobby. And quite a splendid source of material. “The locomotive principle” was what he called the moment when they revealed themselves. As they approached that revelation, he observed carefully their faces and hands, their voices and pauses, all of which, much more than their words, gave an impression of restrained power—and that was just what he needed for his work. The inherent, restrained power of the machine. For that matter, faces—and especially hands—had always seemed to him painfully naked. Another indicator, even more unconscious, is body language, especially the back and the neck. One time outside a shop, I caught sight of myself in a treacherously positioned double mirror, in semi-profile, from behind. It was very unpleasant.

I’m getting off the subject. Wait.

He made use of their intensity regardless of where it was concentrated, sometimes in the most ridiculous hopes and propensities. He collected their energy, went home, and could often work for hours on his conception of the consummate machine. He loved machines, their power, their perfection, their supreme indifference. While people chatted their way to their manias or, let us say, to their motive power, he was very careful not to be drawn into any kind of relationship. He did draw nearer to them, but evasively, and he never sought to converse with women. There were people who retreated afterwards, but he had already used them. Now I’m tired. I’ll continue later.

There were dangerous people and unreachable people, but there were also the confused, the innocent, the manic, and those who were friendly because they were helpless. On the whole, so much power goes to waste! Naturally, categories are always simplified concepts. In the case of human beings they are perhaps as readily distinguishable as, say, the few recurring nightmares that haunt their sleep. (I will return later to the question of dreams, in particular the one about the locomotive. Am I including too much detail? There is much of this I should delete.)

Another day. Sometimes I become unreasonably tired in the evenings. I put my work aside because I cannot draw the full-fledged machine and at the same time make it move, rush, dash, plunge forward, and my head feels like a lump of iron, gliding out of my reach. But most tired of all are my hands. They lie beside me as heavy as the earth, sinking deeper and deeper.

I don't like taking people by the hand. The expression "a helping hand" is disagreeable. Why should I

I have lost my train of thought.

New section:

Sometimes, when he was listening to people, he pretended that they were about to travel—always by train. They begin with small talk, tiny things, the way you do just before the train departs, carelessly, hastily. But the moment the train starts to move, they blurt out what's important to them, the crucial, irrevocable revelation, like a postscript at the end of an irreproachably cautious letter.

And so they vanished, he allowed them to vanish, and he drew away—safely back onto the platform as it slipped rapidly backwards—and went home to work.

Oh stifled power, unleashed in a release of steam, the splendid locomotive of my youth with its long howl, all expectation and alarm, rising straight to the sooty cupolas of every railway shed. The pistons begin to move and then, majestically, dragging its cars in its wake, the locomotive leaves behind on the dreary platform everything that can be left behind and everyone who has said too much or managed to say nothing at all! It is thee I attempt to portray!

I need to revise this, too personal. Check.

Delete or explain why. But I don't know why.

A locomotive dragging all the world's unease back and forth across the whole face of the earth could grow very tired.

Note: I have always been extremely wary of women. They are undependable.

Later.

Sometimes he played with the idea of focusing on one traveler — a *Traveler*, that beautiful, old-fashioned word—and attach himself ever so lightly and with no strings to someone about to undertake a long journey. It could be the pure, free starting gate to an attachment, a longing that need never become contaminated or come too close. The thudding of the rails is like a heartbeat, a rhythmic pulse in the stomach and gut, farther down, farther away, finally only a vibration, the rails are empty and clean, then silence and liberation.

He had never ridden a train. Had no desire to do so.

Actual experience can never be the same as imagined

experience. So he believed.

Railway terminal is another lovely, dignified expression. Now, in middle age, he often passed the terminal and would linger for a moment. But at night—and here are the recurring dreams—at night he would dream about the real locomotives. He was in a hurry, a great hurry, the train was about to leave and he wasn't packed, he couldn't find his passport and didn't know his destination, but it was important, painfully important, and he ran from track to track and had forgotten which train he was supposed to take and when it left and from which platform . . . It was too late, it was all too late. The only person who had ever noticed that he existed was going away never to return, the only person he had not despised and who did not fit into any category. The locomotive screamed, shrieked, and he jumped between the tracks and, with a great metallic roar, the locomotive came closer and closer and drowned and crushed him in its boundless grandeur. He grabbed convulsively at a handle and the air that howled around him was hot, monstrously hot . . .

I know that others also dream about trains, but not the way I do, not at all. They are only afraid of missing the train, simply that. They don't feel the pain I feel.

I will try to explain my illustrations. I gather all the strong colors in the locomotive—deep Prussian blue, coal black, and in the black hints of red-and-white fire, the machine's splendid wide-open eyes that nevertheless carry no hint of threat, the locomotive is utterly indifferent to whatever comes in its path and to everything that coils along behind it, those anonymous cars forever filling and emptying and filling again, of no interest whatsoever, like women.

I have now read through what I've written. I wonder if it is sufficiently straightforward or perhaps, on the contrary, overly explicit. I have been criticized for giving too much attention to detail, but that is precisely what makes me such a good secretary. A long life has taught me to notice and value facts, and I seldom make a mistake. I will now try to continue.

His locomotive studies were done in watercolor, black India ink, and the transparent, luminous Bengali ink that's used for coloring photographs. Of course, he realized he was not the only artist to see into the soul of the locomotive. The painter Turner has quite convincingly represented their dizzying speed and

power, but he conceals what we might call the face of the locomotive in steam and fog. We understand, but we do not see. I find his painting of the onrushing train very depressing. He shows us not the locomotive but only himself.

I'll wait until tomorrow. I won't continue at the moment.

It was a Sunday. He got up very late and sat down at his worktable. He didn't like easels, because his hands and arms grew so heavy that he needed the table's support. Letting your head sink onto your arms for a moment doesn't count, no more than those quick half dreams that punctuate a sleepless night. He spoiled an important surface that couldn't be redone, neither with water, a razor blade, nor by painting over. He sat quietly for a while and stared at his drawing, then he put on his overcoat and walked to the railway terminal. To this day he went there when he felt distressed. Several trains were in, but he paid them no attention. He went to the restaurant and had a beer. The place was full, perfect strangers were sharing tables, trying to look past the people across from them or stare down into their plates. They ate hastily and had placed their bags and suitcases tightly under the legs of their tables. It was crowded and the smell of food was stronger than usual. He drank his beer and despised them. He despised everything just at the moment. And his back ached, the small of his back, where it always aches when you reach an impasse. Directly across from him sat a thin woman in a black coat. She'd been eating cabbage and sausage and now she took out a cigarette and started searching for matches in her purse.

"Excuse me," she said, "but do you have a match?"

He pushed a box across to her and decided to go. "You have paint on your face," she said. Her tone was utterly matter-of-fact, as if she had said your suitcase is open or you have a wasp on your coat, and her gaze moved on at once and she didn't smile. Her discretion was unusual for a woman, and to show his appreciation he asked politely where she was off to. "Nowhere," she said. "I don't like to travel." And a few moments later, as if she thought her reply had been a bit brusque, she added, "I just come here sometimes to look at the trains."

He grew attentive, alert as a hunter. He asked why she was interested in trains, in what way, and had she really never traveled? No, she just liked to look at trains.

Earlier, when he was trying to uncover people's innermost

essence, he had never sought out women. It was possible, even probable, that they could have given him even more usable material, but sound instinct warned him off. Women can exact a heavy price for a confidence and it was best to avoid them. Now he studied this woman who came to the railway terminal solely and exclusively because she wanted to watch the trains come and go, and he thought, is it possible, have I finally met someone I can talk to and who will understand?

"You are fascinated by the locomotives, am I right?" he said.

She shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't really know. It's simply the trains. You know, the trains."

She was a perfectly ordinary woman, maybe a little over forty. Nothing but her interest distinguished her from the others, except perhaps her heavy eyebrows. Now she put out her cigarette and rose to leave. With a little nod to him, she made her way among the chairs of all the other diners and walked out into the waiting room, a strikingly tall and angular creature. She reminded him of a crow.

He thought about her for a long time afterwards. He had never before met anyone obsessed with trains in principle, only people whose jobs involved the railroad or who insisted on talking about their travels. In this woman's case, it was clearly not a question of the locomotive but rather of the cars, a natural feminine perception—to follow, to accept, to be as it were swept along. Another important detail—she had never wanted to travel. What captivated her was not the banal desire to seek out warmer and lovelier climes, an easier or more exciting life, no, she loved trains as such, as a phenomenon. Did she see the beauty of the train? Did she fantasize about a train trip's freedom from responsibility? Setting forth, out, away . . . And as you are carried off, everything you leave behind becomes irreparable, final, and what you're approaching has not yet made its claims. You are a Traveler. For a short time, you are free.

It seemed to him terribly important that he should speak to her. He returned to the railway terminal almost every day, but she wasn't there. He tried to remember her face, but all he remembered were her unplucked eyebrows and that she was tall and thin and wore black. The winter continued cold. He worked on his drawings in the evenings. He decided to paint people in the train windows, but he didn't like the result and washed them

off. He saw people at the office but he no longer tried to get them to talk about themselves, and he walked past the terminal less and less frequently. But his thoughts returned again and again to the woman who liked trains. She became a game. He gave her qualities, characteristics, experiences, a profession, even a childhood. He made her strong, brave, and mysterious. It was the first time in his conscious life that he had taken an interest in another human being.

One evening he could not go on working. He had reached a highly critical point. What remained to be added was so important, so delicate, that he needed to pause. I have never been able to decide whether those final, decisive lines or brushstrokes should be done with concentrated intensity or perhaps just the opposite, on sudden impulse, feverishly. I don't know. One can destroy so much or gain you never know what—but there is nothing of the gambler in me. My principle has always been to feel my way. I'm always searching, and time passes, so very soon I have no more time. Strange, is it not, that the locomotive should be the motive force (ha ha) for this artist?

Wait a moment.

He went out—to the railway terminal. And there she stood on the platform. She was taller than all the other people waiting there, but what primarily set her apart from the crowd were her shoulders and the way she held her head, an immobility that showed she was not there to meet someone, that she was waiting only for the train. It came in, slowed, stopped, the platform filled with people hurrying towards one another or past one another, but she didn't move. When the platform around her was nearly empty, she turned to go. Then he walked up and asked her if she recognized him. She nodded. Her expression was rather sharp, and for a moment he was confused by the fact that her face didn't match the picture of her he had created in his imagination. Only her eyebrows were the same, very thick and dark, while beneath them her eyes seemed oddly uncertain. She looked away.

"You needn't be uneasy," he said. "I would just like to talk to you, talk about trains, about traveling . . ."

"I've never traveled," she said.

So he tried to explain. "That's why I must talk with you. I don't travel either, but I'm fascinated by trains, just as you are . . ."

She started walking towards the waiting room. She didn't understand. It was a ridiculous situation. She had long legs and walked very quickly, he almost had to run to keep up.

"Just for a little while," he begged. "You wouldn't like a cup of coffee? No? But we could sit in the waiting room, if you have time. Surely you can spare a few minutes?"

They sat down on a bench and she lit a cigarette. Naturally, he had imagined an easy conversation comparing their views on the symbolism of travel and trains, absolutely nothing personal, but her compact silence, the feeling that she might at any moment stand up and go, made him lose his footing. For the first time in his life, he grew careless and revealed himself. He told her about his drawings, about his dream of one day finishing them and getting them published as a book. He told her what trains had meant to him when he was young . . . Occasionally he stopped and waited, but the woman beside him went on smoking and said nothing. And finally, driven by her silence, he humiliated himself by telling her of the anguished dreams in which he kept missing trains. He talked faster and faster, unable to stop himself. All this time, people were carrying their bags back and forth right in front of them, and the loudspeakers were calling out train arrivals and departures, so he raised his voice and tried to force her to look at him, and then finally he took her hand and cried, "Do you see? Do you see what I mean? This is serious for me, it's important. You must think I'm crazy, but if you saw my drawings you'd understand that I really know what I'm talking about and that I'm perfectly lucid—in fact, I'm practically a scholar on the subject."

"I understand," said the woman, solemnly. "I understand what you mean." She seemed to be searching for words in the same aimless way that she was always digging around in her purse. Finally she simply repeated, "I understand."

He was very tired. They went into the restaurant.

Now, afterwards, it seems incredible that I didn't grasp what that meant. When a woman says that she understands, it means quite simply and simplistically that she's getting away with as little effort as possible. She, this special woman, couldn't find the words because she had nothing to say. But I, who had spent such a long time fashioning her character and giving her particular qualities, I saw in her silence merely reticent strength, an

independence that allowed no one to come too close. It's incomprehensible.

Later.

She's coming tomorrow, so I won't be able to work, I will only be aware that she is here in the apartment. But before she comes, there are many things I need to clarify. I need to go through what I've written and spell things out in greater detail. But not right now.

Watch out for repeated words.

He had hired her to keep house for him. She was to come three times a week to cook, clean, etc. The woman's name was Anna, so let us call her simply Anna (a name as pale as milk). Why did he do it? It's unbelievable. Why had he let her in? Was it because she, this woman, Anna, was the only person who knew him? She was therefore important and needed to be kept close? Was that how it happened?

The first time she came she was wearing a white apron under her coat and carried a bag apparently containing what she would need for her housework. She was very correct and asked to go directly to the kitchen. But since Anna—I will try to use her name, although I prefer to think of her as "the woman"—since Anna had now become the person closest to me personally, I suggested that she look around the apartment. She followed me through my rooms, and as she earnestly and carefully observed the objects I am accustomed to having around me, I saw my rooms through her eyes as if for the first time, and they struck me as oddly empty. She said nothing. How could I know why? She was elusive, guarded, unreachable. It was, of course, for this reason that I could believe in her hidden strength for such a long time, the strength my dream had given her.

We came into my workroom. Needless to say, I had put away my locomotive art. Only some mechanical drawings lay on the table. She looked at them and then at me, a kind of veiled, conspiratorial glance, and she smiled. For the first time, she smiled, but it was a frightening, intimate smirk. She had not forgotten. No, she had not forgotten my unburdening myself. And she believed that these mechanical drawings were my locomotive illustrations!

Right then and there I should have sent her away, but I did not. She continued to come, she cleaned and cooked, and the

whole time I was afraid of her sudden, quiet smile and that quick conspiratorial glance. Not rapport, not the sharing of an important secret—rather the sharing of something shameful, a shame she could forgive but never take seriously.

Perhaps all my life I've needed someone who is very strong and who tells me what to do.

It wasn't she.

She wasn't even a passenger.

Now I'm very tired. I'll wait.

So, anyway, she smiled and went to the kitchen. She's here every third day. I count the days by her, the woman Anna. She owns everything I have ever allowed to slip past my self-restraint, my dignity, my private autonomy.

One moment. I'm writing too quickly. I've lost the thread again.

So, he tried to put her in her place, but she kept avoiding him, and now and then, as she swept by, she'd give him that horrible smile, that smirk of shameful collusion. But then her eyes looked away again. She never stood behind that smile.

I had thought that I'd finally found a traveler, a person who traveled in her thoughts, in her dreams, at home in her room, much more than those who perpetually crisscross the globe. I thought she might have understood my great catastrophes that never put anyone at risk but that did get people to notice me, to see that I existed and that it was I who had saved them. I could have shown her my locomotive drawings. But I waited. I no longer trusted her.

We used to take our meals together, and she would take off her apron to eat with me.

I was on edge the whole time, perhaps with anticipation, perhaps with fear. I still didn't know if the woman Anna had brought my dream vision closer—or destroyed it. It was impossible to speak to her, not only because her vocabulary was unusually limited but also because I was never sure if she understood me. And yet I could not keep quiet, I babbled endlessly, helplessly. I was sometimes gripped by an overwhelming need to take back everything I'd said, deny it, erase it, but even stronger was the compulsion to confide still more in her, to give her details, to shower her with everything that had been and could have been my life. I would follow her

out to the kitchen and talk and talk about myself, leaning against the counter, at the kitchen table, I could not stop! And when I had finally crucified myself, she would smile and want to go for a walk. She insisted on helping me on with my overcoat and made sure I hadn't forgotten my scarf. She owned me, she had swallowed me. She was a kind of monster, believe me, a monster. We always walked to the railway terminal, and when the evening train glided in to the platform, she would take my hand and press it conspiratorially, and every time an odd warmth would run through me, violent, as strong as when I was young and saw trains come in and felt that now I'd forget the brakes and drive the locomotive straight in over the platform and the people, straight in!

Delete later

I am often very tired lately, though I don't work more than necessary. Have I managed to explain everything that happened? Or am I being tedious? I need to go over all of this very carefully.

One mild Sunday in late winter, she suggested that we go to the botanical gardens instead of the railway terminal. Why? Well, because the woman Anna liked greenhouses. We went. And as we stood there in the humid, overheated glass building contemplating the static greenery, she took my hand the same way she was in the habit of doing when a train came in. She pressed my hand and gave me that ghastly smile. We returned home. We walked side by side, and I knew that the woman beside me carried with her everything that was me and that it had no effect on her whatsoever and that she had understood nothing.

We continued with our daily lives along quiet paths of repetition and accommodation, paths we wore steadily deeper. Try to imagine a track, a furrow that gradually wears its way so deep that one can no longer climb out over the edges, only continue, continue walking, running, dashing in the same direction . . . I began to hate her. Not immediately. But instead of ignoring her, forgetting that she existed, I was conscious of her every second of my waking life, and at night she ravaged my dreams. What was I waiting for? There was no longer anything to wait for, there was nothing for us to share except those meals, during which I usually read, and her abominable walks. Every day I decided to fire the woman Anna, very politely, give her a

large sum of money; every day I decided at least to be silent, to say nothing; and every day was a miserable failure. In the end I was driven irrevocably to show her my own work, the careening locomotive.

"But where is the platform?" she asked. "Isn't the train in the station?" And I saw, through her terrible, stupid eyes, I saw that the locomotive was standing still. It was not moving. I turned the picture to the wall and went to the window so I wouldn't have to look at her. The room was silent for several minutes. The she came up to me from behind and put her arms around me. For a moment, her long, hot body was pressed against mine. It was hideous. She said something. I don't know what she said. I don't know what happened except that I suddenly ran down the street to the corner where I buy my newspaper.

Did I mention that spring was on the way?

I'm not an experienced writer, but I need to finish this story. The woman Anna began calling me by my first name. My nightly dreams changed. It was no longer the locomotive that haunted me, it was she. As always, I was running across the tracks with the terminal's massive glass-and-metal skeleton against the night sky above me, and far off I heard trains whistling on their way to distant places, but now she came leaping towards me over the tracks like some black bird. She was hot and smelled of sweat and held her arms wide to catch me, and at the same time I knew that she already had me, had everything that was me stowed away in her belly, undigested and irredeemable. I awoke in unspeakable terror and my first thought was, Is it today she's coming? Is it today or not until tomorrow . . . ?

Her days off came to be the most difficult. I could not stop thinking about her for a second, and my hatred seemed almost unbearable. I was bound to her the way a person is linked to a conscience, a shadow, a crime. She was never unfriendly towards me. As I sat at my mechanical drawings, she might put down a plate beside me—she had baked something, made pastries of some kind—or a cup of coffee or some flowers in a glass. She emptied my ashtray and went out into the kitchen and closed the door so quietly that it made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

I began having different dreams. I dreamed that I turned on her and screamed with hate and raised my hands to heaven and

chased her with intent to kill. She was the one running away across the tracks, she was the one panting and stumbling and looking back over her shoulder, screaming when she saw me coming after her with hands like claws! And I woke up, sobbing. I was strangling the sheets.

Anna bought vitamins for me. She didn't think I looked healthy, thought I was pale and ought to rest or take a trip. She actually said "take a trip." A little later she added, "Why, we could take a little trip together." I said nothing and let her prattle on about Majorca and the Canary Islands, group travel, how much she had saved and how she would be no trouble. And if I didn't want to fly, a trip by train could be just as much fun—we could go north instead, maybe Rovaniemi, where they have such a nice hotel with reindeer hides and a big fireplace . . . She wanted to treat me. She actually wanted to treat me to the trip, and finally she said, "Why, I'll bet it would be nice for you, since you're so interested in trains."

I think that was the day I decided that she would die.

I prepared for the trip very carefully, reserved sleeping-car accommodation well in advance, booked rooms at the hotel in Rovaniemi. I walked around as if in a friendly haze, everything dulled and shapeless, and it felt wonderful. The woman Anna was garrulous with pleasure, proclaiming again and again how right it was that the two of us, who had never traveled, should make this journey together. She baked pirogies, she put together a lunch to eat on the train, she was secretive and painfully roguish. I went out into the kitchen looking for matches and saw a bowl of blood on the counter, yes, blood, somewhat coagulated, with foam around the edges. She said it was for blood pancakes—we could eat them cold with lingonberry jam. On the night train. She'd worked it all out.

That bowl of blood was horrible. I felt ill and left the room, closed the door on her, and I thought, I can't do it, I can't stand the sight of it. But we can stand more than we think, and everything must proceed to its logical conclusion. There are times when only ideas and a strong will are equal to the task before us . . .

Wait, I'm digressing, but I can fix that later. Right now I just need to go on writing as fast as I can, so we came to the railway terminal and I helped her up with all our bags and baskets and

bought a carnation she wanted to pin on her coat and magazines and asked if she wanted a Coca-Cola or some juice and all the while the locomotive stood quietly waiting for me and the hands of the platform clock moved ahead in little jerks, every minute a little jerk, and then she cried, “Oh if only there was someone to see us off, someone to wish us a pleasant journey!” And when the train began to glide along the rails, she leaned out, holding the handle of the door, and waved and waved at people she didn’t know and leaned farther and farther out as they slipped back and away and my locomotive was already picking up speed and as the wind began to grab at her I gave the door a shove—the impact ran through me like a flame—and the door swung out and she went with it and vanished in a flicker of black, a fluttering bird. That’s all there was to it.

I had thought through the whole thing so often and so meticulously that every detail was polished, every possibility taken into account. At first I had the locomotive whistle, a long cry as she fell, but I took that out. Another possibility was to have the woman go into the compartment to organize the baggage and the pillows, presumably waving out the window when the train started to move so she couldn’t see when I jumped off on the other side. But my attention to detail was insurmountable—the doors on that side are locked. Then I decided to go and buy cigarettes at the last minute, a perfectly natural thing to do. She stands in the window uneasily and sees me running and calls out, “Hurry! Hurry! The train’s leaving!” But it’s too late. I slow down, I spread my arms in helpless resignation.

I could also have waved to her and laughed. But that would have been almost too cruel.

Translated by Thomas Teal

A MEMORY FROM THE NEW WORLD

IN A LARGE American city, Johanna from Finland sat mending underwear in the room she had rented for herself and her two younger sisters. It was a March evening, and outside in the early spring dusk the streetlights came on.

It had been hard in the beginning. They had missed the silence and couldn't sleep. None of them got any rest in this foreign city. But they grew accustomed and eventually stopped hearing the traffic. It became like the murmuring of the forest or the rain. Johanna was the first who stopped listening and slept. She had to save her strength, for each new day had to be dealt with as it came along. She was the strongest of them, heavy and well built. It was she who had found jobs and a place to live for all three of them in the new country, and she gave herself credit for that effort. No one knew how hard it had been, least of all Maila and Siiri, who just followed and let things happen. But then they were made of weaker stuff and were born later, when their parents were already worn out. It isn't easy to ask for work and humble yourself in a foreign language that you don't know, while the days go by and the money runs out and you know it's impossible to go home again. Now she and Maila had steady jobs as cleaning women in a factory, and Siiri did the bidding of a housewife in town as a maid. This evening, Johanna was working the night shift.

As she sat and sewed, her thoughts went far back, all the way to the old country, to her father who'd said, "Johanna, now that you're going to America, I'm counting on you to take care of your younger sisters and see that they don't go to the devil. You know better than anyone that they are weak and vacillating, especially Siiri."

"Father," she had answered, "you can rest easy." And he had nodded and gone back to his work.

That was the time of the great emigration to America, when many homesteads were abandoned and animals were sold off for less than they were worth. The crossing was ghastly. When

Johanna remembered the storm, she saw the family's *Illustrated Bible* in her mind's eye, with its terrifying pictures of the end of the world when sinners and innocents were cast higgledy-piggledy into darkness to be sorted out on Judgment Day. The family Bible had been very important to her. It would have been a comfort to her here in the new world, but of course a book like that must go to the sons, who carry on the family name. Anyway, the worst part of the trip was that people were ill and vomited and couldn't help themselves. Before it got really bad, she had tried to get Maila and Siiri to sing. Later she settled for holding them by the forehead when they gave in. The stench in the hold grew so strong that she herself was on the verge of letting go, so she wrapped a cloth around her stomach and made it fast with a belt and pretended that she was steering the ship and was responsible for all of them. Then it passed and she grew calm. She was equally calm at Immigration, when their papers weren't in order and the officials wouldn't let them enter. She sat there all day like a rock and wouldn't budge until finally the Americans gave in. That's the way it had been. Now she wrote to Father once a month and gave an account of their lives. Father never answered, because he had other things to do.

When the clothes were mended, Johanna began cooking supper. She closed down her memories and let them rest. Maila was always the first to get home. She was a quiet person and was happiest alone. She had been so even as a child. Now she went in behind the curtain in the corner and changed out of her work clothes into clean ones, then she spread a tablecloth and set the table.

"Why are you setting only two places?" Johanna asked.

"Siiri said to tell you she won't be coming to supper today," Maila answered.

"She could have said so this morning. Is she out with him now again?"

"I don't know," Maila said.

That's the way she was. She wanted to know nothing, take responsibility for nothing, get involved in nothing.

"You should try to keep track of what your sister does," Johanna said when they sat down to eat. "She's younger than you and prettier, and she can be led astray so easily. She tells me nothing, but it'll be me who has to clear up any mess she gets

into."

Maila was silent.

"I've got the night shift at the factory," Johanna said. "You'll have to tell me what time she comes home and where she's been. I need to know what's going on. I've mended your clothes and put them in the bottom drawer. Have you rubbed butter on your hands?"

"Yes."

"Good. The skin will crack from all that scrubbing, and then they won't be of any use to anyone."

I know that, Maila thought. After doing the dishes, she lay down on her bed.

"Take a blanket," said her sister. "You shouldn't sleep without something over you."

"I'm not sleeping," Maila said.

Johanna sat by the window and worried about Siiri. If only it hadn't been an Italian. Americans were foreign enough, but she had to go and find herself an Italian, a dark-skinned little good-for-nothing who was shorter than she was. Johanna had seen them down on the street saying good night. Siiri would never have dared bring him up to the room. He had the wrong religion, too. Everything about him was wrong. And when asked, she was snappish and gave flippant, evasive answers and then went and lay on her bed and pretended to sleep. And now Maila lay there the same way, with her face to the wall though it was still early. Suddenly Johanna felt very tired. How am I to cope with them? she thought. I can't even talk to them, they just crawl into their shells. How am I supposed to help them if they don't even hear what I say?

She said, "I've got our folk costumes ready for the Finnish Festival. Now, this time, don't leave the apron at home. Are you asleep?" She waited a moment and said, "We'll have a good time at the Society. Are you asleep or are you awake?"

But Maila didn't answer.

When Johanna came home towards morning, Siiri lay in bed, but she'd thrown her clothes in a pile and her blanket lay on the floor. Johanna picked it up and covered her, and when she bent down over the bed she smelled wine. Siiri lay with her arms thrown over her head like a child, and her round face with its half-open mouth was also that of a child, now, as she slept.

Johanna sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at her sister. She's not pretty, she thought. She has a perfectly ordinary face that no one would look at twice back home. Her legs are too short, and her eyes are very small. But she's young and round and laughs a lot. What am I to do with Siiri, who's throwing herself away without a thought for her future?

She went for a glass of water to put beside the bed and found flowers in the sink, a bouquet in the process of wilting. When she came back with the water, Siiri had turned and her hand lay across her breast. Two wedding rings shone on her finger. God have mercy, Johanna thought. She hasn't been to work today, she's run off and married her Italian. As quietly as she could, Johanna opened her cot, made it up, and lay down, but she couldn't sleep. She could only think about the future. She knew that the Italian lived with his three brothers in a room somewhere near the harbor and that he wasn't worth having. She knew Siiri had acted out of spite and that she would be unhappy. And she was immeasurably hurt at not having been allowed to help with the arrangements. If misfortune had to occur, they could at least have dressed it up, a party at the Society with coffee and music. Somehow the marriage could have been explained away and given an honorable if pitiful place. Now it was all wrong from beginning to end. Siiri had had no faith in her sister and had not asked for her advice. They could have talked about it. They could have made plans together, and Johanna would have decided what was best for each of them without doing any of them the least harm. For the first time since the hard journey from the old country, Johanna began to cry. Maila no doubt heard her, but she was a coward and pretended to sleep.

When Johanna woke up the next morning, her sisters were up getting ready for work. She got out of bed and sat on the edge of her cot for a while. She was terribly tired.

"Go back to sleep," Siiri said. "You had the night shift. We'll put your coffee under the cozy." Johanna could hear in her voice that she was afraid.

"You're not getting off that easy," Johanna said. "I need to talk to you. But first I'm going to wash my face." She went to the sink and there was complete silence behind her. They're frightened, she thought. They're afraid of me. It was a difficult thought, a

thing she had not understood. You take care of people and tend to everything, you're considerate, you struggle and plan, you think you're giving them a good life, and suddenly they turn away from you and are afraid. She washed her face and turned towards the room and said, "I congratulate you on your marriage. We could have had a party at the Society and sent out invitations."

"That's nice of you," Siiri said, looking as if she were hunted by dogs. She had her work satchel and was ready to go.

"Are you leaving right now, this minute?"

"Yes. It's late."

"I think we'd better be off," said Maila, already at the door.

And so they left and nothing further was said. I know, Johanna thought. I know how they run down the stairs. They're relieved, as if they'd gotten away with something, I know how they feel. What is it that's wrong? Why is it like this? They make me so tired, and we have our whole lives ahead of us.

It was a beautiful March day with a sharpness in the air. Spring had come at last.

That evening, Johanna asked, "Aren't you going to invite him home?"

"He doesn't want to come," Siiri said.

"If he doesn't want to come, it's because you've made him scared of me. What did you tell him?"

"Nothing."

"What does he know about our life?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know," Johanna repeated. "You know nothing, you and Maila. You creep away from everything and say you don't know. It's so easy. And you go and get married, you who thinks everything is easy. You enter into matrimony. Do you know what it means? Do you know what it means to take care of another human being?"

Siiri's answer was cheeky. "Lucio's going to take care of me!"

"Lucio's going to take care of you! That's lovely. He earns nothing, and he'll never be able to give you a home. You can't even consummate your marriage because you don't even own a bed."

Siiri screamed. "Oh! Really! Is that right!? Well, then, give us a

bed! Hang up another blanket in some corner and leave us in peace! You've got blankets hung up all over the house anyway, so no one will see the dishpan and the washbowl and everything else you want to hide! You fix everything so fine, so give us our own blanket so we don't have to look at you!"

Johanna didn't answer, but sat very still. Siiri had never before turned on her as if she hated her. It was dreadful to feel this stifled animosity pouring forth in rash words. It was like a powerful blow below the belt. She made no answer. Siiri stood staring at the floor, then suddenly she sprang into action and ran to the door.

"Take your coat," Johanna said. "It's still cold."

Siiri was out almost every evening, and when she came home she was surly and silent and went to bed at once.

"Do you talk American to each other?" Maila wondered.

"Yes. What else?"

"But you hardly know any."

"Neither does he."

Siiri was in the habit of not saying Lucio's name at home, not a single time since that first evening. Johanna supposed it was some kind of punishment. "Does he work down at the harbor?" she asked. "Or what does he do?"

"A little of everything. He helps his brother."

"And what does his brother do?"

"I don't know exactly. Business."

"Business," Johanna repeated. "You know what Papa thought about business, and all the trouble he had with the people who do business. And you ought to understand that a person who doesn't dare talk about his work isn't proud of what he does."

"Are you?" Siiri blurted out.

"Yes. I do a good job that I'm not ashamed of." Slowly, Johanna blushed. She looked at her sister and said, "I know I'm red in the face, but if it's a blush of shame, it's not for me but for you. I haven't written to Papa about your marriage, because I can't make things sound better than they are. You'll have to write to him yourself, but show me the letter so I can check your spelling. And the next time you see your Italian, I would ask you to find out what kind of business he's in. Otherwise I'll find out for myself."

Johanna didn't know where Lucio Marandino lived, and she didn't care. She went to the Italian consulate. With the help of her dictionary, she'd composed several questions that required answers, but all they could tell her was that he did odd jobs. On the day they counted their money, Siiri had almost none of her wages left and couldn't contribute to the household pool.

"What did you buy yourself?" Johanna asked her. "You haven't brought home anything new, and you've eaten at home. Don't tell me. I know. You've given your wages to him. He's not earning any money right now. When will it get better?"

"Next week," Siiri said. "He's got something big coming up next week."

And the following week, Siiri came home with new stockings and a red dress and a necklace that was certainly not made of glass beads. Johanna said nothing. She let Siiri be happy with her presents and asked no questions. If the Italian had found an honorable job, Siiri would have said so herself. But the next day, when the sisters were at work, Johanna took the necklace to a jewelry shop and asked what it was worth. The man behind the counter went into another room, and when he came back he was brusque and wanted to know where she'd got it.

"That's none of your affair," she said. "I want to know what it's worth."

"Is it an heirloom?"

"I don't understand. Is it genuine?"

"The stones are real. Do you want to sell it?"

"No, I just want to know."

He shrugged his shoulders and told her there would be a charge for an appraisal. She didn't understand the words, put the necklace in her purse, and went away. But what Johanna had understood—very clearly—was the man's suspicions and the respect in his hands when he touched Siiri's necklace. She was greatly distressed and didn't know what she should do. All through work that day she could think of nothing but the necklace. Mysterious words like "diamonds" and "gemstones" floated through her thoughts. She couldn't tell Siiri that her Italian was a thief. She couldn't tell Siiri she was wearing a fortune around her neck. She couldn't sell the necklace to make life easier for them. She couldn't do a thing. And saying nothing

was the same as lying.

By and by, hard times came again for Lucio Marandino, Siiri's wages disappeared, and Johanna was forced to dip into their savings. They never spoke of him. For Siiri, home had become a place where she ate and slept, and she was never happy. She wore the necklace when she went out in the evenings. But one fine day it was gone. Johanna noticed at once. Because Siiri and Maila never told her anything, she was forced to go through their drawers. Belongings reveal a great deal. The necklace was not there. The Italian had taken it back, had sold his gift. Siiri's behavior would have been different if she had gone and lost it. Now she was merely distant and nonchalant, as if nothing had happened at all.

"Maila," Johanna said, "what has she told you?"

"Nothing."

"Don't you talk to each other? What do you talk about when I'm not home?"

"Oh, nothing much."

Johanna got angry and shouted, "You're like a cow! What do you want? What *is* it? Do you have a good life or don't you?"

"Why are you making such a fuss?" Maila said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Living together grew very difficult. Sometimes Johanna thought she should give them a little gaiety, but she had no idea how to go about it. Back home, when you felt bad, you went out on the hillside for a while or into the woods, and then you came home again and no one noticed. In a city, you go out and slam the door, or close it terribly quietly, and everyone knows that now she's walking the streets because she's so sick of it all. They know. And, when she comes back, everyone tries to act normal but can't.

Somehow I have to help Siiri, Johanna thought. It can't go on like this. She just sits there and says nothing.

Now the Finnish Society's annual Festival was coming. It was an important event. People made a show of all they'd accomplished during the previous year; everything was noticed and discussed. How could she deliver up her little sister to such judgment? Siiri would arrive with her Italian and they would sit there together, the one with her pale white hair and the other dark and much too small and there would be all those questions

about his work and where they lived, all those friendly, stubborn questions that were not meant to help—they were just talk, but dangerous talk that could do much damage. And they had to go to the Society's Festival all three of them—Johanna was on the board.

And so the big day came, the way all things do in time. Siiri wanted to wear the red dress the Italian had given her.

"But this is a Finnish celebration," Johanna said. "The most important one of the year. We wear our folk costumes to honor the old country. Remembering the old country is the only thing of real value we have left."

Suddenly Siiri was beside herself. "You and your memories!" she screamed. "You make all the decisions!" She lost her temper completely and shrieked at her sister. "You can keep your old country! I want to live in the new country and I want to wear my red dress!" And she threw herself on the floor and wept.

Johanna got her onto the bed and put wet towels on her temples. When Siiri had calmed down enough to listen, Johanna said the red dress would be all right. Everything would work out, but Siiri was not to cry and make her face swollen and ugly. After all, she wanted to look pretty for her Italian.

"I don't want to see him," Siiri whispered and began to cry again.

"Maila," said Johanna, "go to the pharmacy and get something soothing. Take the dictionary."

In the evening, they went to the Society. Siiri's face was flushed, and her eyes looked even smaller than usual. Her manner was almost defiant. She spoke quickly and thoughtlessly to everyone they met in the hallway, looking around the whole time, but he hadn't yet arrived. The Society had a space in a school in the eastern part of the city and members were sitting at school desks two by two. The platform was decorated in blue and white, with spruce branches and candles. He came in at the last minute and sat down beside Siiri, who had saved a place for him. Johanna sat behind them with Maila. She looked at his fat little neck with its black locks and thought, This is a bad man. How can he seem so round and childish? The orchestra struck up the national anthem and everyone stood, Lucio Marandino a bit later than the others. Funny, Johanna thought, they're actually round and childish both of them. If they had a child, it would be fat as

a piglet. Everyone sat down again. Siiri glanced right and left to see what kind of an impression her Italian was making, and she rested her left hand on the back of the desk in front of her so her wedding rings would show. This was his first time at the Society. From time to time she pressed up against him to show that this man was hers.

"Maila, do you see the way she's carrying on?" Johanna whispered. "Don't speak to her this evening. I've made up my mind for all of us."

Maila stared at her sister Johanna for a long moment, then she looked away and sat quietly as before.

After the lecture and the choir, they all went out into the corridor where coffee and juice were being served. Siiri and her husband did not approach the serving table but stood quietly by the boot rack.

"Wouldn't you like some coffee?" Johanna asked in Finnish. "Shall I get you a cup?"

"No, thank you. I don't care for any."

"If you hide here by the coats, you won't be able to talk to people. It's not often you get to speak your own language outside the four walls of your home."

"I'll talk to Lucio," said Siiri, and she said it as a challenge, loudly, as if she wanted to start an argument.

"You'll be all alone," Johanna replied. "They don't like him." And so it was said and couldn't be taken back.

"It is a very Finnish party," said Lucio Marandino. He spoke bad American. His eyes were like knives. He knew well enough what they were talking about.

"He means it's no fun," Siiri said. "And he's absolutely right. I think your old Society is awful!"

"Now, you're not to disgrace yourself," Johanna said. "You mustn't cry. Here's a handkerchief—go to the lavatory and wait there until you're calm." Siiri took the handkerchief and went. So that's what things had come to, Siiri mocking the Society, the only thing that still bound them to the home they'd left behind. It meant nothing to her that once every month she had the great good fortune to spend an evening in a place where she could speak her own language to any person she met and be understood and be able to say, "Do you remember . . . ?" or "What province are you from and how has life treated you here

in the new world . . . ?" No, she had withdrawn from all of them with her Italian, whom she couldn't even talk to, a thief who understood nothing. Johanna turned to him and said in American, "Go away. Leave my sister. You don't have the money for a home. You can't live in our home. No one likes you. It's all wrong."

He answered, "I don't like you. You are an awful person from Finland."

The orchestra began playing folk songs, and people went back and sat down in their places. Siiri sat stiff and straight beside her Italian. Her red dress stood out like a sore thumb in the room. They heard a new lecture, but Johanna had a hard time listening. She was thinking only of the money she had brought with her to buy Siiri's freedom from a life of misery. It was everything they had saved and set aside, a thick purse of black leather, and she had it in her apron pocket. The purse was perfectly safe in her pocket, but her hand kept creeping down to check that it was really still there.

When the Italian got up, she followed him. He went out into the school yard to smoke. It was very dark in the yard, but she could see his face in the light from the festival-room windows. They were alone.

"You are not strong," Johanna said. "You're nothing. Leave my sister. No money, no home, we can't help. Go away."

He started speaking Italian, rapidly. When he stopped talking, she went up close to him and said, "You are a thief. I know. I will go to the police."

Lucio Marandino froze. He tried to say something.

"I will go to the police," Johanna shouted.

Then he pulled out a dictionary, gave Johanna his matches, and while she lit one match after another the Italian looked up the words he needed. Finally he said, "Proof. You have no proof."

"But I know," she said.

"You have no proof."

Then Johanna took out the purse and held it out to him. "Count it," she said. He counted the money and stuffed it into his pocket without the slightest trace of shame.

She said, "Now you go away."

For a moment he stood and glared at her. Johanna glared back and thought, Go ahead, hate me. I can take it. You won't get the

better of me.

The Italian walked off across the school yard, and she went back to the party.

Thereafter they continued to live in their new country, and their fortunes improved. Johanna wrote home every month. “Our lives are good. We have no important news to report.”

Translated by Thomas Teal

AN EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY

WHEN WE arrived and Jonny caught sight of the big cars parked outside Grandma's building, he said right away that he should have worn a dark suit.

"Don't be silly, sweetheart," I said. "Relax. Grandma isn't like that. People pop in and out in corduroy trousers and all sorts of stuff. She likes bohemians."

"But that's just it," he said. "I'm no bohemian, I'm ordinary. I've no right to wear corduroys to an eightieth birthday party. And I've never even met her before."

I said, "We'll unwrap it before we go in, it's more polite. Grandma doesn't like opening parcels, except at Christmas."

Choosing the present hadn't been easy. Grandma rang up and said, "Dear child, make sure you bring your young man so I can have a look at him, but don't go buying some expensive and unnecessary gift. At my age, I've got pretty much everything I want, plus better taste than most of my progeny. And I don't want to leave a load of rubbish for others to clean up after I'm gone. Just pick out something simple and affectionate. And don't go bringing art into it—you'll only mess it up."

We racked our brains. Grandma thinks of herself as so broad-minded and easygoing, but in fact she's forever burdening the family with modest requests which, in all their simplicity, can be a real pain. It would have been easy, for example, to choose her a stylish bowl in thick glass, but no, that would have been too bourgeois and not at all affectionate.

Of course, I'd told Jonny all about Grandma and her paintings, and he was really impressed. We have one of her early sketches at home, a drawing of San Gimignano, where she went on her first grant-funded trip, before she became famous for painting trees. She often talked about San Gimignano and I always loved hearing her talk about how happy she was in that little Italian town with all its towers; how strong and free she felt when she used to wake up at dawn to work, and a signorina would push her vegetable cart through the streets and Grandma would open

her window and point at what she wanted and they would understand each other perfectly and laugh, and it was hot and everything was incredibly cheap, and then Grandma would set off with her easel . . .

It's a story Jonny likes, too. And then, would you believe it, the other day Jonny went off on his own and found a picture of San Gimignano in a little secondhand shop! So that's our present. They said in the shop it was an early nineteenth-century lithograph. We didn't think it was that special, but anyway.

"Jonny," I said. "Let's go in now. Just be yourself, act natural, that's what she likes."

There was a long line of well-wishers queuing in the doorway of Grandma's studio. A couple of young cousins were scampering in and out, taking everyone's coats, and we were gradually swept into the large, airy room, beautifully decorated by Grandma's acolytes. I fixed my sights on her and steered us forward, giving Jonny's arm a quick squeeze to calm him. In the background some low music was playing—not classical, but something specially chosen, bearing Grandma's personal stamp. We walked towards her. She had dressed with her usual studied nonchalance; her white hair lightly arranged in casual curls around her watchful, gracious face and clear, teasing eyes.

"This is Jonny," I said. "Jonny, Grandma."

"How nice of you to come," Grandma said. "So this is Jonny. Finnish-speaking, I believe?" She smiled at him benignly. "How will you cope in an ossified old family where no one speaks anything but Swedish? And how are things, are you two married or not? All done and dusted?"

"Done but not dusted," said Jonny boldly. Grandma laughed and I knew she liked him.

"Well, where's your present?"

She stared at the picture of San Gimignano for a long time, remarked that we'd gone to a great deal of trouble, and flashed a quick smile. "I drew that same view," she said, "but better." Then, with a little gesture that was dismissive but also showed a secret understanding, she moved on.

The large table on which Grandma posed her models dominated the room. It was covered with her brocade from Barcelona and richly spread with everything from olives to cream cakes. Young family members ran about with vases they'd filled

with water earlier that morning, while people stood about in groups having frenetic conversations and everyone was served a glass of champagne. Grandma sailed above all this like in a painting by Chagall, dispensing a sort of general benediction as she moved about the room dropping small pronouncements here and there. But I noticed she took care not to introduce anyone by name. Not the slightest suggestion of failing memory—just introduce yourselves, dear friends. Oh, to be as free as Grandma!

A mass of screaming children persisted in running back and forth across the studio, but this didn't seem to irritate Grandma in the least. She just let the mothers take charge of whoever it was they had brought into the world. Jonny and I sat down at a crowded table only to realize a moment too late that we'd chosen badly. This was a table for what Grandma calls the intellectuals, who associate exclusively with one another. I couldn't figure out what they were talking about. Despairing of something to say, and after a long silence, I finally turned to a gentleman with a goatee and remarked that the evening light in the studio was unusually beautiful. To my relief, he started talking about the significance of light and then moved on to the theory of perception. It took me ages to work out that he was an art critic.

Luckily all he seemed to want was a listener, so I nodded thoughtfully and said yes of course, and how true, and occasionally glanced at Jonny, who was sitting across from me looking miserable. He'd got stuck beside one of those geniuses who never say a word to help you out. Even so, I was quite proud of having brought my Jonny into a family with artistic roots, who really knew how to carry off a party on this scale.

Eventually he extricated himself and came over and hissed in my ear, "Can we go home now?"

"Of course," I said. "Soon."

It was then that they came in, three gentlemen of uncertain appearance. They looked somehow disheveled—or, more accurately, stained or smudged. They certainly weren't bohemians. They did have long hair, but in a more middle-aged way. They made a grand entrance, bowing low to Grandma and kissing her hand. She led them to an empty table at the far end near the window and made sure each got a glass of champagne. Pretty soon one of them dropped his glass on the floor. He was in a state about it, but Grandma just smiled, though I knew how

much she treasured those glasses—a wedding present, I think. Coffee and cake were being brought in now, but these new gentlemen continued to be served champagne. Not the rest of us.

I noticed Jonny was cleverly moving along the wall by carefully studying everything hanging on it, till in the end he reached the new gentlemen's table. Of course he didn't understand that this was a table set aside for the not-entirely-respectable; dear, sweet Jonny. But he did seem to be enjoying himself at last.

One of the three went over and lifted a whole bottle of whiskey from the liquor table and, as he carried it back, made a deep bow to Grandma, whose smile seemed to be wearing a little thin.

My art critic had moved a bit farther off but was still delivering an animated lecture about the theory of perception. I got up quietly and snuck over to Jonny, because it depressed me listening to stuff I didn't really understand or care about. One of the gentlemen, with a droopy gray mustache, lifted his glass and said, "And so he writes crap about you, Juksu."

"Absolutely," said Juksu. "And only three inches."

"You measured it?"

"Of course, I took out my ruler and I measured. Exactly three inches. Like buying pea soup in a plastic bag, so you know what you're getting. And no picture. But these newcomers, they get a picture, by God."

The third man said, "The trouble is, he's so old; he just panders to the young."

"Yes, it's hell."

"But you can't have everything in life," said the man with the mustache.

"No."

They talked on, calmly and thoughtfully. They sounded like men who were used to talking together but could no longer be bothered with actual discussions. They made statements. They never referred to things like perception but seemed more interested in rising rents or an unfair review of some painting, though of course what could you expect . . . But when Grandma passed by on one of her charming circuits of the room, they grew lively and gallant. Jonny said not a word, but I could see he was fascinated. None of them paid us much attention, though they

made sure our glasses were always full and made a space for me closer to the table. Their conversation was soothing, and we sat as if on an island sanctuary. None of them asked us about ourselves; they let us be anonymous.

The party around us floated into the distance. The room had grown dim; the children had vanished. Suddenly someone turned on the overhead light and someone else carried in pirogi. The man called Juksu stood up. So did the rest of us, and somehow we all came out into the hall together. After a lot of bowing and scraping and sincere expressions of affection for Grandma, we took the elevator down. But Grandma managed to whisper to me, "Don't buy them drinks. There are three of them and you can't afford it." Though I think she saw that Juksu had her whiskey bottle hidden inside his coat.

It was cold when we came out on the street. And very quiet. No cars or people and that remarkable half-light that comes with spring evenings. After a fairly long silence we introduced ourselves. They were Keke and Juksu and the one with the mustache was Vilhelm.

"Well, let's get going," said Vilhelm. "We'll head into town. But not to the usual place."

"No," said Keke. "Not there. They're not nice anymore. Let's go sit down somewhere and then we'll see." Then he turned to me and said, in a very kind voice, "How long have you two been living together?"

"Two months," I said. "Well, two and a half, nearly."

"And it's going well?"

"Oh yes, really well."

Vilhelm said, "Let's go to our spot. Where the newspapers are."

This was outside the covered market down by the harbor. We each took a newspaper to sit on out of a recycling bin and settled in a line along the edge of the quay. The square was empty.

"Now let's have a little drink," said Juksu to Jonny. "But we'll have to do without glasses, if your wife will excuse us. You don't say much. Everything okay?"

"Just fine," said Jonny.

I had a feeling I ought to go and let him stay there with the three of them. I turned to Vilhelm and said politely, "It's really nice here. I like people who don't take life so seriously."

“You’re very young,” said Vilhelm. “But you have a wonderful grandmother.”

We had a drink together and then suddenly Jonny spoke up excitedly. “I was listening to what you were saying, that we can’t expect to have everything in life, but still you have to expect something, I mean expect something incredible, from yourself and from other people . . . You have to set your sights high because it always turns out a little lower, if you know what I mean—like with a bow and arrow . . .”

“That’s it exactly,” said Keke reassuringly. “You’re absolutely right. Look, here they come. I like boats.”

We took another swig from the bottle as we watched the fishing boats slowly approach the quay. Two drunks wandered up. “Hi, Keke,” said one of them. “Oh sorry, you’ve got company. Got any cigarettes?”

Keke gave each of them a cigarette and they walked on. Up in the spring sky the dome of the cathedral rested like a white dream over the empty square. Helsinki was indescribably beautiful, I’d never realized before how beautiful it was.

“The Nikolai Church,” said Juksu. “They have to change everything. So now they call it the Great Church. It’s idiotic, it doesn’t mean anything.” He let the empty bottle slide into the water and said as a kind of afterthought that they can’t even write decent poetry anymore.

By now the night was as dark as it ever gets in May, but we still didn’t need any lights.

“Tell me something,” I said. “What do they mean by perception?”

“Observation,” said Vilhelm. “You see something and suddenly you recognize some old idea or, better yet, some new idea.”

“Yes,” said Keke. “A new idea.”

I was feeling cold and suddenly angry and said eightieth birthday parties were a really stupid idea.

“My dear,” said Vilhelm. “It was a proper party, and a beautiful one in its way, but now it’s over. Now there’s just us sitting here trying to think.”

“What about?” said Juksu.

“About ourselves. About everything.”

“What do you suppose Grandma’s thinking about?”

“No one knows.”

Vilhelm went on. “For instance, about this business of maybe fifty a week. They run themselves ragged. And still they only have time for the young ones, the bastards.”

“Who?” I asked.

“The art critics. Fifty shows a week.”

“And no one asks anymore,” Keke said. “We’re over and done with. We were critiqued long ago.” He thought for a moment. “My bum’s getting cold. Let’s make a move.”

As we walked farther along the quayside, he asked me what I wanted from life.

I hesitated. Then I said, “Love. Security, maybe?”

“Of course,” he said. “That’s right. In a way—for you at least.”

“And travel,” I added. “I’ve got this real passion to travel.”

Keke was quiet for a while and then he said, “Passion. As you can see, I’ve lived quite a long time, which is to say I’ve been working for quite a long time, which is the same thing. And you know what? In the whole silly business, the only thing that really matters is passion. It comes and it goes. At first it just comes to you free of charge, and you don’t understand, and you waste it. And then it becomes a thing to nurture.”

It was awfully cold. He was walking too slowly, and I was freezing.

Then he said, “You lose sight of the picture. I think we’re out of cigarettes.”

“Not a bit of it,” said Juksu. “Philip Morris—Grandma shoved them in my pocket. She knows what it’s like.”

Keke went over to the other two men. They lit their cigarettes and walked on as slowly as before.

Jonny and I followed them. I whispered, “Are you tired of this? You want to go home?”

“Ssh,” he said. “I want to hear what they’re saying.”

“His clay,” Vilhelm was saying. “It went to an amateur. Some pushy little nobody. He hadn’t been dead two days when this creep comes along and buys the clay from his widow for nothing. And he was old; just imagine that clay.”

“Hang on a minute, Jonny,” I said. “I’ve got sand in my shoes.” But Jonny went on ahead with the others.

When he came back he told me excitedly how clay becomes more and more a living thing over time and how you always use the same clay for every sculpture and you can’t ever let it dry

out, and new clay just isn't the same, it's not alive . . .

I asked him which of them was the actual sculptor, but he didn't know.

"They were just talking about seeing a picture," he said, "so I don't know." But he was very excited and asked if we had anything at home, anything we could offer them. After all, it wasn't that late. "And anyway," Jonny said, "this isn't a chance we'll ever have again. I really want to."

I knew we didn't have much in the house, and Jonny knew it too, perfectly well. Some anchovies, bread and butter and cheese, but only one bottle of red wine.

"That's enough," said Jonny. "You and I can just pretend to drink. They'll stay for a while, long enough, don't you think? And it's only just around the corner."

"Okay, let's do it," I said, and he laughed.

Brunnspark was beautiful: everything growing and bursting into leaf. Suddenly I wasn't tired anymore; all I knew was that Jonny was happy.

We all stopped in front of a large bird-cherry tree that was already in full bloom, shining chalk-white in the spring night. As I looked at the tree, it suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't loved Jonny the way I could have loved him, totally.

Keke looked at me and said, "That's only a gift; it doesn't mean anything."

I didn't understand. We walked on.

He said, "You know your grandmother never painted anything but trees, and always trees in the same park. In the end she knew trees, the very essence of trees. She's very strong. She never lost her passion."

Of course I had huge respect for these men who did nothing but search for their lost passion and cared about nothing else, but at the same time I was worried there wasn't enough coffee and the house was a mess. And I started thinking about what was on our walls; maybe our pictures were completely unacceptable, just things we liked without having any idea why. Keke asked me if I was cold.

"No," I said. "One more street and we'll be home."

"Your grandmother," said Keke, "has she ever talked to you about her work?"

"No, she never has."

“Good,” Keke said, “that’s good. They wrote her off in the sixties but she stuck to her guns. You know, my dear—I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“May,” I said.

“Perfect. You know, it was all Informalism then, everywhere; everyone was supposed to paint the same way.” He looked at me and could see I didn’t understand. “Informalism means, roughly, painting without using definite forms, just color. What happened was that a lot of old, very talented artists hid away in their studios and tried to paint like young people. They were afraid of being left behind. Some managed to do it, more or less, and others got lost and never found their way back. But your grandmother stuck to her own style and it was still there when all that other stuff had had its day. She was brave, or maybe stubborn.”

I said, very carefully, “Or maybe she could only paint her own way?”

“Marvelous,” said Keke. “She simply had no choice. You comfort me.”

We’d come to the door of our building, and I said, “Now we have to be quiet or the neighbors will complain. Jonny, you go up and get something out of the fridge—whatever you can find.”

We got in. Jonny put out the red wine and glasses and our guests sat down and went on with their conversation. We didn’t turn on the lamp; there was enough light from the window.

After a bit Jonny said he had something they might like to see, and I knew he wanted to show them his model ship. He’s been working on it for a couple of years, every detail handmade. So they went into the spare room and Jonny switched on the overhead light. I could hear a murmur of conversation but left them in peace and went to the pantry to put on some coffee.

By and by, Jonny came out into our little kitchen. “They said I’ve got a passion,” he whispered. “A vision of my own.” He was very agitated. “But it’s not theirs, it’s not the one they’re searching for.”

“Great!” I said. “You take in the coffee and I’ll bring the rest.”

When I came out, Vilhelm was talking about the flowering bird cherry we’d seen on the way home. He said, “What can you do with something like that?”

“Just let it flower,” said Keke. “Look, here’s our lovely hostess!

Isn't that right—shouldn't we just let it flower and admire it? It's one way to live. Trying to re-create it is another. That's what it boils down to."

After the party broke up, Jonny was silent till we went to bed. Then he said, "Maybe my passion is nothing special, but at least it's mine."

"It is that," I said.

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

THE SUMMER CHILD

IT WAS clear from the very start that nobody at Backen liked him. He was a thin, gloomy child of eleven, who somehow always looked hungry. The boy should have aroused people's most tender protective instincts, but he just didn't. Partly it was his way of looking
at people or, rather, of observing them, with a suspicious piercing stare that was anything but childlike. And then he would hold forth in his odd precocious way, and dear God the things he came out with!

It would have been easier to overlook all this if Elis had come from a poor home, but he did not. His clothes and his suitcase were clearly expensive and his father's car had delivered him to the ferry landing. It had all been arranged by advertisement and telephone: the Fredrikson family was offering a holiday home to a child for the summer out of the goodness of their hearts, and for a small fee, of course. Axel and Hanna had discussed it thoroughly—all the big-city children in need of fresh air, woods, water, and good food. They had said all the things people usually say to convince themselves that only one course of action would allow them to sleep easily at night. Meanwhile there was all the rest of the work that had to be done in June. Many of the summer residents' boats were still in their slips and a couple of them hadn't even been properly checked over.

And so the boy arrived, carrying a bunch of roses for his hostess.

"You really didn't need to, Elis," said Hanna, thanking him. "Or was it your mother who sent them?"

"No, Mrs. Fredrikson," Elis answered. "My mother's remarried. It was my father who bought them."

"Very kind of him . . . But couldn't he have waited a little before driving off?"

"I'm afraid not, an important conference. He sends his respects."

"Yes, yes, right," said Axel Fredrikson. "Well, let's get aboard

and get home. The kids can't wait to meet you. That's quite a suitcase you've got there."

Elis told them it had cost eight hundred and fifty marks.

Axel's boat was quite large, a sturdy fishing boat with a deckhouse, and he'd built it himself. The boy climbed awkwardly aboard and at the first splash of spray he grabbed hold of the seat and closed his eyes tight.

"Axel, don't drive so fast," said Hanna.

"He can go in the deckhouse."

But Elis wouldn't let go of the seat or even once look out at the sea the whole way there.

The children were waiting expectantly on the dock—Tom, Oswald, and little Camilla, whom they all called Mia.

"Well," said Axel. "This is Elis. He's about the same age as Tom, so you should get on fine."

Elis stepped onto the dock, went up to Tom, took his hand, gave a short bow, and said his full name: "Elis Gräsbäck." Then he did the same with Oswald, but just looked at Mia, who giggled uncontrollably and put her hands over her mouth. They walked up to the cottage, Axel carrying the suitcase while Hanna carried a basket of shopping from the local store. She put on the water for coffee; the sandwiches were already made. The children sat around the table staring at Elis.

"Just help yourselves," Hanna urged them. "Elis is new here, so he can go first."

Elis half stood up, took a sandwich with a sort of little bow, and said it was remarkably hot for the time of year. The children continued to goggle at him as if bewitched and Mia said, "Mom? Why's he like that?"

"Ssh," said Hanna. "Elis, please help yourself to some salmon. We caught four on Thursday."

Elis stood halfway up again and observed that it was remarkable you could still find salmon when the water was so polluted. Then he told them what salmon cost in town, meaning of course for those who could afford to eat salmon outside of special occasions. Somehow he made them all uncomfortable.

In the evening, when Tom went to empty the slop pail into the bay, Elis followed and saw what he did and talked on and on about the polluted oceans and how irresponsible people were destroying the whole world.

“He’s weird,” Tom said. “You can’t talk to him. He just talks nonstop about pollution and how much everything costs.”

“Ignore it,” said Hanna. “He’s our guest.”

“Weird sort of guest! He follows me around all the time!”

It was quite true. Wherever Tom went, Elis was right behind: the boathouse, the fishing beach, the woodpile, absolutely everywhere.

“What are you doing now?”

“Making a bailer dipper, obviously.”

“Why don’t you have plastic bailers?”

“Just what we need,” said Tom contemptuously. “This dipper’s going to be a special shape, and it’ll take me a while to make it.”

Elis accepted this and said seriously, “Of course. What with decorating it, as well. But it’s such a waste of good work.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, since the world’s going to end, you might as well use plastic.”

And then he’d start in again, the whole thing, nuclear war and God knows what, blah, blah, blah, nothing but endless blather.

Their room was in the attic over the kitchen, with a sloping roof and a window that looked out toward the meadow. In the evening Elis would take ages folding his clothes and hanging them up, placing his right shoe properly next to the left and winding up his wristwatch.

“Yes, but what’s the point of all that?” Tom said. “You said a nuclear war could happen any minute, even tomorrow. Then it’s all down the drain with Friberg’s gherkins.”

“Friberg’s gherkins?”

“It’s just a saying.”

“Why? Who’s Friberg?”

“Lie down and go to sleep and stop being stupid. I don’t feel like talking.”

Elis turned to the wall. His silence was compact, but you knew very well what he was thinking, and you knew that little by little it would all come out, there was no stopping it, and come it did, a soft-spoken litany about the ruined sea and the ruined air and then all the wars and all the people who had nothing to eat and were dying everywhere all the time and what can we do, what can we do . . .

Tom sat up in bed and said, “But that’s all a million miles

away. Come on, what's really up with you?"

"I don't know," said Elis, adding after a while, "don't be angry with me."

Then, at last, silence.

Tom was used to being the eldest and making decisions and giving orders to Oswald and Mia and sorting out the silly things they did; it was just what older brothers do. But for some reason it was different with Elis; totally impossible to get any sense into him even though he was the same age as Tom. You just got angry with him. It didn't even feel good when he admired you. And it was all so unfair. Like that business with the grebe. It wasn't Tom's fault the bird got stuck in the net. These things happen. He threw it in the water and Elis made a big deal out of it. "Tom. That grebe took a long time to die. They can dive tens of meters deep. Did you know that? Think how she must have felt, how long she must have tried to hold her breath . . ."

"You're crazy," Tom said, but it made him feel bad.

Or he might say, "I know what you do with kittens, you drown them. Do you have any idea . . . ?" And on and on—it was unbearable.

Elis buried the grebe up near the road to the town where there had been a forest fire and there was nothing left among the tree stumps but willow herb; trust him to find a spot like that. He put up a cross with a number on it. Number one. Other graves followed—rat-trap victims, birds that had flown into windows, poisoned field mice, all solemnly buried and numbered. Sometimes Elis would remark in passing about all the lonely graves that had no one to care for them. "And where is your own family graveyard? I'm interested. Do you have a lot of relatives buried there?"

When it came to giving people a bad conscience, he was an expert. Sometimes all he had to do was just look at you with those gloomy, grown-up eyes and you would instantly be reminded of all your failings.

One day, when Elis's forebodings were even gloomier than usual, Hanna cut him off. "You're very well informed about everything that's dying and miserable, aren't you, Elis?"

"I have to be," he answered seriously. "No one else cares."

For a moment Hanna was overcome by goodness knows what

and wanted to take the child in her arms and hug him, but his stern gaze stopped her. “I shouldn’t be so hard on him,” she told herself later. “I must be kinder.” But before she had the chance, something terrible and unforgivable happened. Elis promised to give little Mia three Finnish marks to show him her bottom. “He wanted to watch me pee,” said Mia. And, almost as bad, Elis asked his landlord, “How much are you getting for me?”

“What did you say?”

“How much a month are you being paid for me? Is it over the counter? I mean, are you paying tax on it?”

Axel exchanged a look with his wife and left the kitchen.

On top of all this, Elis had a real talent for finding things that were broken. He was constantly dragging in damaged items and showing them to Tom. “Can you fix this? You can fix anything. Look, it’s been out in the rain and it’s gone all moldy. It was nice, once.”

“Chuck it out,” said Tom. “I only make new things. I can’t be bothered with rubbish.”

Elis collected the junk in a pile beside his cemetery. The pile got bigger and bigger and he seemed almost proud of his sad collection. No one else ever noticed all the worn-out, useless junk scattered on the hill. They simply didn’t see it. But Elis did, with his sharp, critical eye. Sometimes when he fixed the family with that look of his, they would suddenly become conscious that their work clothes were filthy, and their hands.

One time Hanna spoke to him with a bit of authority: “Elis, please, just eat your dinner and stop agonizing about everything. Put a little flesh on your bones so your father won’t be ashamed of you when he collects you in the autumn.”

Elis said, “You mean you’ll be able to put up with me until the autumn?” When no one said anything, he went on. “You waste an awful lot of food. Do you never think about all the people in the world who have no food at all? I’m sorry to have to say it, but I know what you throw away and how it all ends up in the sea.”

“That’s enough!” Axel burst out and got up from the table. “I’m going outside to look at the boats.”

Admittedly the Fredriksons were a bit spoiled. They didn’t like food unless it was absolutely fresh, whether fish or meat or Hanna’s home-baked bread, so a great deal did wind up down

the drain with Friberg's pickles, as the saying goes. Elis discovered this fact at once. He would go to the fridge and take out the leftovers that usually lay there until they were stale enough to be thrown away with a clear conscience. He would carefully rescue these remnants and eat them. He might say, for instance, "No meatballs, thank you. The old fish soup is fine for me."

"Ha ha," said Oswald, who followed most of what was happening and thought about it, and who never had his brother to himself anymore because of the summer child. "Ha ha. You're our new slop pail, aren't you?"

"We eat what we eat," Axel said. "But it's not good manners to comment on what our guests eat. Food is not something we discuss. It's just a fact of life."

"It most certainly is not," Elis objected. "Think of all the poor people who don't—" But that was as far as he got, because Axel banged his hand on the table and said, "Now you be quiet! And the rest of you, too. There's no peace in this house anymore."

Out of doors, though, all was completely at peace. It was a time of light breezes and soft summer rain; down in the meadow the apple trees were in bloom, and all of nature was at its loveliest. In previous summers, Tom had wandered the woods and along the shore through the bright summer nights, but it was no fun this year. He could never count on being alone.

"Mom," he said. "How long is he staying?"

"People come and people go," Hanna answered. "Relax. There's a time for everything. This, too, will pass."

The worst part was that Elis was able to support all his arguments with incontrovertible statistics. Whenever the news came on, he glued his ear to the radio to collect new miseries or get the old ones confirmed. The news was the only program he cared about. But he would sometimes mix actual catastrophes with his own fantasies, which then wormed their way so deeply into his dreadful prophecies that Tom didn't know which way was up.

With Elis around, you had to be constantly ready for the worst. For example, Granny was a long-term patient in the local hospital, but when Elis came in and said "She just died!," it turned out it wasn't Granny he meant, but a crow with one leg, for heaven's sake, that he'd been caring for all week.

One day when Hanna was taking the bus to go and see her mother, Elis asked if he could come along, and she thought why not. Of course he was a morbid child, but he did have great compassion for any creature in distress.

The experiment was not repeated. Granny didn't care for all the sighing and groaning at her bedside. He shook his head mournfully and pressed her hand as if saying a final farewell, and when he went out for a few minutes, she asked Hanna angrily, "Who's this insufferable child you've dragged along?"

There was no getting around the fact that the summer child was affecting everyone in the house. They were all a little afraid of him. Axel no longer smoked his pipe after meals but he stomped straight off to the boathouse. He'd grown sullen, and one day when Elis started interrogating him about his income and political views, he stood up and walked out in the middle of the fish soup. Little Mia was too small and innocent to understand, but she sensed the change and grew whiny and difficult. As for Oswald, he was openly jealous. Tom had no time for him anymore, and when they did go out fishing together it wasn't in the nice old friendly, peaceful way. Oswald developed a biting irony: "Are you really going to murder that poor little cod?" or "Look how many corpses in the net today!" And so forth. The whole family had fallen on evil days.

Axel and Hanna knew they'd put a terrible burden on Tom with this summer child, but what could they do? They had their hands full with their daily chores and the kids pretty much had to look out for themselves.

One day, Axel said, "Tom, forget about splitting that firewood, please, and go keep an eye on Elis."

"I'd rather split wood. But he'll be around my neck in any case, so what difference does it make?"

"Well, do what you want," said Axel helplessly and started to walk away, then turned back and said, "I'm so sorry about all this."

You think you're taking in an underprivileged child from the city, but no, you're saddling yourselves with an implacably critical observer who never lets up about the wickedness and sorrows of the world. Do people in the city all raise their kids to view the world with suspicion? Do they all burden them with a conscience they're too young to understand or manage? Axel

discussed it with his wife and she thought maybe they did. The boy needed a change. Why not take him out on the water a bit, now the weather was so calm and beautiful? Hanna could use the time to visit some of her relatives in Lovisa, and Axel had to take some gas canisters out to the lighthouses in any case. The Coast Guard office had phoned that very morning to say the beacon at Västerbåda had gone out. Axel thought it was an excellent idea, so he went off to fuel the boat and stow the canisters, and Hanna started packing a lunch.

Elis was very excited. He kept tapping the barometer for fear of storms and asking about the lighthouses on their islands—were they on real islands, tiny islands?

"Real fly specks," said Tom. "Why?"

Elis answered solemnly that he'd once read a story called "The Isle of Bliss" where the island had been very small.

"Yeah, yeah," said Tom. "Hurry up; Dad's waiting."

"Come on, jump in!" Axel cried. "We're off on a holiday, leaving all of our troubles behind!"

The children jumped aboard. Hanna stood on the dock and waved as the boat set off straight out to sea. It was a mild day, dazzlingly bright with high cumulus clouds mirrored in the sea and no horizon visible. Elis clung to the rail and watched for islands, occasionally turning to grin at Tom; he actually looked as if he was enjoying himself for once. So you're on holiday, you little shit, Tom thought. For the moment you've forgotten that the world's about to end, and you're only thinking of yourself. A bitter sense of injustice welled up in him and he decided to be totally indifferent to Elis all the way out and back again.

The first lighthouse had been built on a very low skerry with a windswept crest of low bushes in the middle. When they landed, gulls rose and circled, screaming. Axel heaved the fresh canisters ashore and dragged them up over the rocks to the lighthouse.

At first Elis just stood and stared, stiff as a poker, then he dashed off, rushed up into the brushwood, and flung himself back down again. Eider hens flew up from their nests with a great roar, but Elis hardly noticed. He ran back and forth shouting at the top of his lungs and finally threw himself headlong into a crowberry bush.

"I told you he's crazy," said Oswald scornfully. "And you let someone like that run after you all day and night. That's a fine

friend you've made!"

Tom walked slowly up to where Elis was lying looking up at the sky, shamelessly contented.

Elis said, "I've never been on a real island before, one that looks like an island. It's so small it could be mine."

"You're babbling," Tom said. "Anyway, it belongs to the eiders too." Then he walked away.

When Axel came back ready to move on to the next lighthouse, Elis wouldn't budge. "I want to stay here," he said. "I like this island."

"But it could take a couple of hours," Axel objected. "We have to get to some lights a long way out. Much more interesting places, high ground, all kinds of things you'd like."

"It's okay," said Elis. "You go. I'll stay here."

They couldn't get him to change his mind. In the end, Axel took Tom aside and said, "You'd better stay here with him till I come back and pick you up. He might fall in the water or do something stupid, and we're responsible for the boy."

Little Mia was shouting, "Want to go to the next lighthouse! Want to go to the next lighthouse!"

"But Dad," said Tom, "I could be with him for hours on this tiny pancake of a place!"

" 'Course you could," said his father, pushing off. "Sometimes we all have to do things we don't like."

"Try and find him some old rotting birds!" Oswald shrieked across the water. "Babysitter!"

It wasn't till they reached the next lighthouse that Axel realized he still had the lunch bag with him. Hanna would never have done a thing like that, forgotten—but never mind, it could have been worse.

Then an hour later it did get worse. The fuel line broke, and you can't fix a thing like that with a flick of the wrist.

"You know what," said Elis, sounding almost reverent. "This island's wonderful. It's so far away, nothing dangerous can get to it. And the water's absolutely pure."

"That's what you think," Tom said. He went farther out on the headland and began throwing small stones in the water. There was absolutely nothing to do but wait and let the time go by and be totally bored. Ha ha, some "Isle of Bliss"! Dark thoughts came

and went and came back again: a whole summer of endless torture and responsibility, not a chance of ever being really alone, surrounded by a bunch of stupid burials and rubbish heaps . . . And, as if today's misery wasn't bad enough, he'd get to hear about tomorrow's, when everything in the world would only get worse and worse. It wasn't fair!

And here came Elis running up with eyes out on stalks, shouting, "An island forgotten in the deep blue sea! It's fantastic! It's so clean! So desolate and deserted!"

"Fantastic, my foot," said Tom. "And it's not exactly deserted, with so many eider chicks hatching this year." He shrugged his shoulders and added, "Though there won't be so many broods, the way you carry on."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that if you scare an eider hen off her nest, she won't come back. They're very sensitive birds."

Elis said nothing. It was fun watching him stride deeper into the crowberry thicket, one slow step at a time with his elbows tight against his sides and his thin neck stretched forward. Now, by God, he could feel for himself what it's like to have someone give you a bad conscience. Tom followed him. Elis was staring down at five chicks, very small, dark, and fluffy, sitting in their nest stock-still.

"Are they all right?" Elis whispered.

"Oh, don't think about it. Think about how you're on 'an island forgotten in the deep blue sea,' isn't that what you said? It might interest you to know that a little island like this can get forgotten for real. It's hard to find your way back."

Elis just stared.

"Don't you believe me? It happens." Tom sat down and rested his chin in his hand. "I don't want to scare you, but sometimes they find human skeletons on beaches around here. Best not to think about it. They probably just sat there waiting and waiting and no one ever came."

"But he's got a map with him," Elis said.

"Does he? Come to think of it, he left the charts at home . . . and that could be bad." Tom sighed and glanced quickly at Elis through his fingers. He had a violent urge to giggle. How's this for one of your catastrophes? And I can make it worse. You wait and see.

Elis went and sat down behind a rock. The sun wandered on toward afternoon, the blackflies sang, and the seabirds quietly returned to their nests.

When Tom got hungry, he had a good idea. He went to Elis and told him they had a problem. They had nothing to eat—just like all those poor people all over the world. “Of course, you can eat crowberries,” he said. “But they can give you a really bad stomachache. And, if you’re thirsty there’s a rock pool right behind you, although the water’s so salty and stagnant that even the water lice have died.” He decided to improve on this. “You can strain off their dead bodies through your teeth,” he said, but he knew at once he was overdoing it, getting too personal, losing his touch. Elis gave him a long, sharp look and turned away.

The seawater was taking on a deeper tone. The hours passed; Axel should have been back long ago. And there was nothing to do but scare Elis. Why had Axel not come? What did he mean by making him uneasy and wasting his whole day this way? It was starting to feel ominous, and he didn’t like it.

“Elis!” he yelled. “Where are you? Come here a minute!”

Elis came and looked at him furtively.

“Listen,” said Tom, “there’s something I should tell you. This weather’s not normal. There’s a storm coming up.”

“It’s absolutely calm,” said Elis, distrustful.

“The eye of the storm,” Tom explained. “You know nothing about the sea. It can happen suddenly—bang. Waves can sweep over the whole island.”

“But what about the lighthouse?”

“It’s locked. We can’t get in.” Tom couldn’t stop. “And snakes come out at night—”

“You’re making it up.”

“Maybe I am, and maybe I’m not. What are you going to do?”

Elis said slowly, “You don’t like me.”

The worst part of all was having nothing to do. Tom took out his sheath knife and went in among the windfalls to cut some twigs for a hut like the ones he used to build for Oswald when they went on expeditions. He whittled and worked until sweat ran down his neck, and it was all completely pointless, but he couldn’t stand Elis looking at him all the time, and it was getting on towards evening and still no boat . . . And now Elis wanted to

know if he was making a distress signal.

"No! Anyway we don't have any matches." Tom lifted the roof section of his hut and anchored it in the thicket. It was totally stupid, the whole thing was stupid, and still no boat . . . If there was a problem with one of the beacons—no, in that case he would have turned back right away. It must be something else, something serious . . . And then the whole roof section collapsed and he swung around on Elis, shouting, "How do you know what it's like when a storm comes up? You've never been in a storm! Everything goes dark . . . And you hear a strange sound coming closer and closer—and all the birds go all quiet . . ."

This was clearly making an impression, so he went on. "Sometimes before a storm the water level rises, but sometimes it falls. Catastrophically! You can see how low it is! Nothing but green slime everywhere. Then the waves come in like a wall and everything gets swept away—everything!"

"Why are you doing this?" Elis whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't you like me?"

"Well, why do you go on and on at me? I'm sick and tired of all of this; it's no fun anymore! Go and find somewhere to sleep."

"But what about the snakes? I'm scared!"

"Oh all right, there aren't any snakes," Tom burst out impatiently. "There aren't ever any snakes on these little skerries. I'm worn out! I've tried, I've tried everything I can think of, but you just don't get any better. All you do is say weird stuff and you're making me almost as weird as you are. And Dad hasn't come, and he should have been here a long time ago!"

"I'm scared," said Elis again. "Do something . . . You know how to do stuff!" Suddenly he grabbed hold of Tom's shirt and kept whining on about how scared he was. "You scared me," he shouted. "Do something. You know how to do everything!"

Tom tore himself free so violently that Elis was thrown backwards. He sat there on the moss staring. His big eyes had shrunk to slits and he said slowly in a very low voice, "Yes, absolutely, your father should have been here a long time ago. Why hasn't he come? I'm sure it's not because he can't find us. You only said that to scare me. Something's happened to him."

Elis waited a moment and then went on triumphantly, "Perhaps he's broken his leg and he's just lying there. And we'll

wait and wait, but he'll never come—"

"Bull!" said Tom, in a rage. "That sort of thing only happens in winter, when there's ice on the rocks." Then he suddenly remembered the time they sat waiting last autumn when Dad went out to the lighthouses with Oswald and the gas caught fire and shattered a lens right in his face, half blinding him, and he got them home as best he could, getting directions from Oswald, who just cried and cried . . .

Elis went on talking, never taking his eyes off Tom's face. "They don't know anything back home. It gets to be late. Finally they realize that something's happened. Does that sound right?"

"I say you're a sissy!" Tom yelled. "You're scared! You're so scared I can smell it . . ."

Suddenly, with incredible speed, Elis leaped to his feet and threw himself at Tom, who only had time to see two flashing rows of small teeth behind a desperate grimace before he was hurled to the ground in a grip that was bone-hard and blind with fury. They rolled in under the evergreen thicket where the light had almost gone, and fought under a low ceiling of tangled branches—you damned summer child, you little bastard, if you let go I don't know what I'll do to you, I'll hit you and keep hitting you. The skinny bony body under him seemed tense to the point of bursting; it was clear that defeat was impossible, unthinkable for either one of them. They had to keep going. They fought in total silence, soundlessly, breathlessly. Tom threw Elis aside and they separated, but they couldn't get up because there was no room under the branches, so they crawled back together and went on fighting, it was all they could do.

The eider hen sat quite still on her nest; she was the same color as the ground. She did not move even when they caught sight of her and when they very carefully crept out from under the tangle of branches and went off in different directions.

Now it was night. The western sky was still burning like a rose down at the horizon, but it was definitely night. Tom walked down toward the beach where Axel usually came ashore. His whole body was shaking wildly and he was trying not to think, not think about anything. Let it be peaceful, please, let it be peaceful. All he wanted was to sit on the slope with his clenched fists pressed hard against his eyes and let it be peaceful. After a long time, a memory burst through and he let it come and it

came. It was about the time the gas had exploded in the lighthouse. Mom asked, “Axel, what did you do?” Dad said, “I crawled for a bit till I could see again a little and got Oswald into the boat and tried to calm him down. At least there was no wind and that was good. You have to take things as they come.” That’s what he said—you have to take things as they come. And then I said, “Dad can get through anything and he’s never scared.” And Dad said, “You’re wrong. I was never so scared in my life.” That’s just what he said—I was never so scared in my life.

Now came the midnight hour when the light in the western sky gives over to the dawn breaking from the other side. It was horribly cold. When Tom walked back in the half-light he could just make out Elis silhouetted against the sea, so he said, “He’ll be coming now. He’s been busy with something important, something he couldn’t put off.”

“You don’t say,” Elis said.

“I do say. And there’s no wind and that’s good. You have to take things as they come.”

They stood a moment looking out to sea. Some gulls flew up from the headland and screamed for a while, and then it was quiet again.

Tom said, “Why don’t you get some sleep? I’ll wake you when he comes.”

Axel came back at daybreak. First they heard the motor like a weak pulse, then it grew stronger, then the boat appeared as a little black speck on the gray morning sea and then they could see the white mustaches thrown up by the bow. Axel rounded the reef, reduced speed, and landed. He saw them standing there waiting and he knew at once. One had an improbably swollen and completely altered nose; the other could barely see out of one eye. Moreover, their clothes were torn.

“Well, well,” said Axel. “So everything seems to be under control. Engine trouble, broken fuel line. I’m sorry about that, but you have to take things as they come. Everything okay?”

“Fine,” said Elis.

“Come on, then. Jump in and we’ll get home. But don’t wake the kids, they’re tired.”

They sat down near the engine cover, where it was warmer, and Axel covered them with a tarp.

“Here’s the lunch bag,” said Axel. “Finish the lot or Hanna will be cross. There’s coffee in the thermos.”

As the boat crossed the bay the sky in the east lightened and turned pink, and the first tiny glowing shard of the new sun appeared over the horizon. It was cold.

“Don’t go to sleep just yet,” said Axel. “I’ve got something for Elis that he’s going to like. Look. Have you ever seen such a beautiful bird skeleton? You can bury it with pomp and circumstance.”

“It’s unusually pretty,” said Elis. “And it was very kind of you to bring it to me, but I’m sorry to say I don’t think I want it.”

And he curled up next to Tom on the floor of the boat and they both fell instantly asleep.

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

A FOREIGN CITY

MY GRANDSON and his wife had long been trying to persuade me to go south and pay them a visit. “You need to get away from the cold and the dark,” they said, “and the sooner the better.” Meaning: before it’s too late.

I don’t particularly like traveling, but I thought it best to accept their friendly offer and get it done. Moreover, they wanted to show off a daughter who’d come into the world a month or so earlier. No, maybe it was a year earlier. Whatever. They explained that the long flight would be too strenuous for me. They thought I should break the journey somewhere, spend the night in a comfortable hotel and continue the next day. Unnecessary. But I let them make the arrangements.

It was already dark when we landed for my stopover.

In the arrival lounge I realized I’d left my hat on the plane and tried to go back but they wouldn’t let me through passport control. My legs hurt; I’d been sitting still for too long. I drew a hat on the cover of my ticket but they didn’t understand and just waved me on to the next window, where I handed over all the papers my well-organized son had given me. Most had already been checked and stamped but I showed them all again to be on the safe side. I was disconcerted by this business about my hat, and in any case I hate flying. It gradually got through to me that they wanted to know how much money I had with me, so I pulled out my wallet and let them count it for themselves, then found some more in my pockets. The whole thing took a terribly long time, and by the time it was over nearly all the other passengers had vanished and I was afraid of missing the bus into town. They motioned me to another window, where I’d clearly already been. By now I was nervous and may have seemed impatient. Whatever the reason, they took me behind a counter and went through my suitcase. I had no way of explaining to them that I was only nervous because of my missing hat and my fear of missing the bus. Yes, and my insurmountable hatred of flying—well, I’ve already mentioned that.

Finally I drew another picture of a hat, lots of hats, pointed to my head and tried to smile. They called over an elderly man who seemed very calm. He looked at me and my drawings and said something that might have been, “Don’t you understand? This gentleman has lost his hat.” At last I had the feeling I’d been understood and wasn’t the least bit surprised when they directed me to the next window, where there was a little room full of hats, gloves, umbrellas, and the like. I took out my drawing and, to make things clearer, shaded in the hat with black. By now all the passengers had gone and they’d begun turning off the lights in the arrivals hall; the luggage trolleys had been rolled away and I realized they wanted to be rid of me. I pointed at a hat up on a shelf and thumped the floor with my stick. They gave me the hat; it wasn’t mine but I was so tired of the whole business I just put it on my head and signed a form. Of course, I wrote on the wrong line and had to do it all over again.

When I finally got out of the building, the road was empty. The formless desolation so characteristic of airport surroundings stretched away on all sides. The night was cold and misty. When I listened I could hear the city far away and had an impression of absolute unreality. But I said to myself, This is absolutely no cause for alarm, this is simply an unfortunate situation that is never likely to happen again. Calm down. Just wait. For a while I thought about going back and asking someone to ring me a taxi. “Taxi” must be more or less the same in all languages, and of course I could always draw a little car. But somehow I didn’t feel like going back into the dark arrivals hall. Perhaps the last plane had taken off and there were no more due to arrive that night; what did I know about their big—well, their flying machines as we called them when I was young! My legs hurt and I was very vexed. The road seemed endless, with long dark spaces between the streetlamps. I remembered that they were short of electricity.

So I waited. I began tormenting myself again with the fact that my memory is getting worse, an annoying insight that often afflicts me whenever I have to wait. And I can’t help noticing that I often repeat myself, say the same things to the same person several times and realize it only afterwards, always with a sense of shame. And words disappear as easily as hats, as easily as faces and names.

As I stood there waiting for a taxi, a terrible realization began

to dawn on me. At first I pushed it aside, but it wouldn't go away, and in the end I was forced to face the disagreeable fact that I'd forgotten the name of my hotel. Completely. I took out my papers and went through them all. Nothing. I spread them out on my suitcase under a streetlamp and got down on my knees so as not to miss the tiniest little scribbled note. I searched my pockets yet again. Nothing. Back home, my methodical son must have given me some sort of confirmation that the hotel had been paid for, but where had I left it—somewhere in the arrivals lounge or back on the plane? No. I'd have to remember. But the harder I cudgeled my brain for the name of the hotel, the emptier it became. And I knew it was impossible to get a hotel room in this city unless you'd booked it far in advance.

Now I was afraid to get a taxi. I began sweating and took off the hat, which was in any case too small and pinched my head. And then, as I stood there in the uncertain light of the streetlamp with this strange hat in my hand, I noticed there was a name in it; the owner had written his name in the hat. I put on my glasses; yes, unquestionably a name and an address. It was a comfort, a foothold. A genuine communication. I tried to shake off my fatigue. When I get tired, everything slips away from me. I want to be attentive, aware, decisive, not slow down and lose my way. And not repeat myself. People notice that immediately; they become polite and embarrassingly sympathetic. I know at once when I've been repeating myself. Unfortunately, just the tiniest bit too late . . . But I've already said that.

And now here came a taxi, at first far away down the long road, then nearer, headlights dimmed, it drew up and stopped in front of me. What could have been more natural than to show the driver the address in the hat? Without a word he began driving towards the city. I let my thoughts rest. It was a long way; the buildings around us were dark, and if anything the mist had grown thicker. When the car stopped I took out my wallet while he sat still, his taxi meter switched off. "Dollars," he said finally. I handed them to him, one after another. It was quite impossible to tell when the man had received enough, he just lifted his shoulders and looked straight ahead. Rest assured that by the time I finally got out of the car with my suitcase, I was thoroughly sick and tired of the whole journey. The house in front of me was very old; it looked medieval. The square was

totally deserted.

I opened the front door and only then realized how lucky I was; it could so easily have been locked. Stairs and high corridors, numbers on the doors but no names. I changed into my strongest glasses, the ones I use for stamp collecting, and read what was written in the hat. It is so reassuring that there are people in the world who still take the trouble to write out a long address in clear handwriting. Number twelve, it said. I knocked and the door opened immediately.

Somehow I'd expected an older man—I mean, someone who might be expected to forget a hat, but this man was very young, tall, and strongly built with a mass of shiny black hair. Of course, I ought to have learned at least a couple of phrases: good evening, excuse me, I'm so sorry but I don't speak your language . . . As it was, I just held the hat out to him and said, "Sorry." He hesitated, perhaps thinking I expected him to put something in the hat, so I quickly turned it crown upwards and said "Sorry" again.

At that he smiled and said in English, "Can I help you?"

My relief was enormous.

"I think this is your hat," I said. "I'm terribly sorry, I'm afraid I took it by mistake . . . Look, this is your name and address, isn't it?"

He looked and said, "Remarkable. This hat belongs to my cousin. He was living here six months ago. Where did you find it?"

"On the plane."

"Of course. He gets to fly sometimes. He's a civil servant. Come in, it's cold this evening. It was kind of you to go to so much trouble so late at night."

The room was a small one. In the light from the single table lamp I got a general impression of pleasant homely untidiness: books, newspapers, and piles of papers all over the place. It was very cold.

He asked me where I was from and did I know the city . . . Oh, of course, just passing through. But it was unusual for people to break their journey here. Unless they had business here, of course. Would I care for a cup of tea?

I watched him lift the kettle from the stove and take out cups. All his movements were very calm. Occasionally he looked at me

and smiled. It was so peaceful to be able to sit with him and drink tea and quietly wait for the name of my hotel to pop up. I was dreadfully tired. After his first polite questions, he said nothing more, but it was a pleasant silence.

In the end I remarked on the fact that he had so many books. And on how it was difficult these days to get your hands on the books you wanted.

"Yes. It is very difficult. People keep track of what's being published and, when it comes out, somehow they know, they sniff it out. And go and queue for it. I'm very proud of my library."

"You're a writer, perhaps?"

"Not really. Just articles, in a way."

"And what kind of books particularly interest you?"

He smiled again and said, "Everything."

I said that I myself, on a modest scale, had published a bit on the subject of, how should I put it, the changes that affect us as we get older. I wondered if I could send him a couple of books.

"Please do. They might reach me. The post isn't always reliable."

Then it was time for me to go. It was terribly late. My suitcase was waiting by the door. A taxi, of course. But I couldn't see a telephone. He watched me looking around the room and said, "No, I have no phone. But I can go out and try and find you a taxi. It's not so difficult, but it may take some time." He got up. When he reached the door I called out, "One moment . . . I'm extremely sorry, this is really embarrassing." In my shame I tried to be funny. "Apropos the changes caused by aging . . . I, if anyone, should be able to explain how a person can forget the name of the hotel where he's booked a room."

My host did not seem amused, nor did he attempt to make light of it. He stood and thought for a while, then explained that, since it was impossible to find hotel rooms in the city, it would be best if I spent the night with him. Somehow it seemed unnecessary to raise polite objections. He explained that sometimes as many as half a dozen people spent the night in his apartment. He pulled out a sleeping bag and promised to wake me in good time for my flight. I was to have his bed; I accepted.

There was a knock on the door. Luckily I had not yet started undressing. It was a young woman with dark hair. She glanced at

me almost without interest, walked past him to the window, carefully drew aside the curtain and looked out. They began talking together, very rapidly. Even though I couldn't understand, I grasped that something serious had happened. He started walking back and forth across the room, opening drawers, taking out papers, glancing through them quickly before shoving them into a paper bag. He was clearly in a hurry, but his movements remained as calm as ever. Finally he turned to me and said, "I'm afraid I have to go. But please stay and sleep in peace; my friend will come and wake you in good time for your flight. Don't forget to send me the books; I'd be very happy to get them."

I just nodded. I didn't want to delay him. When they had gone I listened carefully and heard them go down the stairs, heard the front door close. I continued listening. By now they must have crossed the square and made it into the streets beyond. I lay down on the bed but couldn't fall asleep.

About half an hour later, there was a pounding on the door. Someone shouted God knows what, and I got up and let them in. By now I was so tired I noticed only a number of uniforms filling the room. I had to show my passport and my tickets. They stripped everything they could out of the drawers and cupboards, while a single thought repeated itself in my head: He got away, my friend got away.

In the morning the young woman came and woke me in good time. She had found a taxi and came with me to the airport. She got very angry with the driver—I think because he was demanding dollars. I hadn't even learned to say thank you, but I believe she understood.

As I say, I often repeat myself, but this story has never been told before. At least, I don't think so.

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

THE WOMAN WHO BORROWED MEMORIES

THE STAIRWELL with its stained-glass windows was as dark and cold as it had been fifteen years earlier. Some of the plaster ornamentation had fallen off the ceiling. And like fifteen years ago, Mrs. Lundblad was busy scrubbing the stairs. She looked up at the sound of the door and exclaimed in delight, "Well, I'll be! If it isn't Miss Stella! Abroad for so long! And just like the old days—trench coat and no hat!"

Stella ran up the stairs and stopped almost shyly in front of Mrs. Lundblad; they had known each other well, but had never been in the habit of hugging or shaking hands.

"Nothing's changed here!" said Stella. "Dear Mrs. Lundblad, how's your family? Charlotta? Edvin?"

Mrs. Lundblad pushed aside her bucket and said that Charlotta was still enjoying Stella's bicycle, although these days only in the country; they now rented a little summer cottage. And Edvin had a good job with an insurance company.

"And Mr. Lundblad?"

"Passed away six years ago," said Mrs. Lundblad. "Peacefully; he didn't suffer much. I see you have flowers with you, miss. I expect they're for her, upstairs in your old studio. Have you time for a cigarette?" She sat down on the stairs. "I see we both still smoke the same brand. And now you've gone and got famous for your paintings! We've read all about it in the paper, so congratulations from the whole family. Are your pictures still the same?"

Stella laughed. "Oh no! They're so big these days, they wouldn't even fit through the door up there! As big as this!" She stretched out her arms.

A blast of loud dance music suddenly filled the stairwell and was almost instantly switched off again. Stella recognized it: "Evening Blues." That used to be our tune, she thought, Sebastian's and mine. So she's still got my old 78s . . .

"She does that all the time," said Mrs. Lundblad, tossing her cigarette butt into her pail. "Five years older than you, miss, and

still living her life as if it's a nonstop party; not that anyone ever comes to see her. The place is empty. Not like when you used to live up there! All those artists running up the stairs—it was fun. They'd work all day and come here in the evening and play and sing and you'd make them all spaghetti. Remember, miss? And she'd hang around trying to be like the rest of you?" Mrs. Lundblad lowered her voice. "And then you let her stay there for ages when she couldn't pay her rent, for heaven's sake, and then you won that scholarship and went abroad and she just took the whole place. Fifteen years! No, no, don't say a word. I know what I know. Any idea, miss, what we used to call the studio? The swallows' nest! But all the swallows flew away. And it's like that old saying: When the swallows go, it's because the home's no longer a happy one. And one swallow doesn't make a summer. Now, enough's enough. I'm not saying another word. I'll just get on with these stairs. Oh, and they've put in a new lift at the back. Would you like to try it?"

"Maybe not today. Tell me, Mrs. Lundblad, did I really use to run up all these stairs?"

"Yes, miss, you surely did. But time passes."

There were lots of unfamiliar names on the doors of the flats.

Well of course I ran. Maybe just because I liked to run. I couldn't help it.

The studio door had been repainted but the knocker with its little brass lion was the same, a present from Sebastian. Wanda called from inside, "Who is it? Is that you, Stella?"

"Yes it's me. It's Stella."

A moment passed before the door opened.

"Darling, how wonderful," cried Wanda. "You're finally here, imagine! It takes a bit of time to open the door, but you know how it is these days: One can't be too careful . . . Safety chain, police lock, everything . . . But there's no choice, there's just no choice—they steal! One has to be careful day and night; they come in vans and take everything and just drive off . . . They clean you out, you know, just leave the place empty! But not here! This door's locked and bolted. But come in and have a look around! Flowers—how nice of you . . ." She set the flowers aside still wrapped and inspected Stella intently with the same pale, fixed gaze, unchanged in a somewhat heavier face. And the same insistent voice. The walls were still whitewashed, but everything

else in the very small room was new and different: an excess of furniture, lamps, ornaments, draperies . . . It was much too warm. Stella took off her coat. The room was shrunken and frightening. As if trees had been cut and a thicket of undergrowth had taken their place.

"But make yourself comfortable," Wanda said. "What can I get you? Vermouth? Or wine? Like I used to serve in the old days, red wine and spaghetti! Always red wine and spaghetti! So you've finally come back. How many years has it been—no, we won't count them. Anyway, now you're here. And all those cards I wrote, and you just disappeared; the great artist vanishes into a great silence. That's life!"

"But I did write to you," Stella put in. "For a long time. But when I heard nothing from you—"

"Stella, dear, don't worry about it, don't even think about it, let's just forget it. Now you're here again. What do you think of my little lair? Small and unpretentious, but pleasant, don't you think? Lots of atmosphere."

"Very nice. Such nice furniture." Stella closed her eyes and tried to remember the studio the way it had been—workbench here, easel there, lots of wooden boxes . . . And a bare window overlooking the courtyard.

"Are you maybe a bit tired?" said Wanda. "You look exhausted. Around the eyes. Now you can rest a little and take it easy after the big wide world."

Stella said, "I was just trying to remember the studio. We were so happy here. Imagine, seven years of our youth! Wanda, how long do you think we get to be young?"

Wanda answered quite sharply, "You were young for too long. Starry Eyes. Yes, that's what we called you, Starry Eyes. Nice, isn't it? So naïve, you believed everything anyone told you. Everything."

Stella stood up and went to the window. She pulled the drapes aside and looked out over the gray, very ordinary, still-fascinating courtyard with all its windows and remembered: I stood here with Sebastian. We looked out beyond the roofs, out over the harbor, out over the sea, out over the whole world that we were going to own, battle our way through and conquer. This very window! She turned to face Wanda. "You said I believed whatever people told me. But there was so much to believe in,

wasn't there? And it was well worth it, don't you think?"

Dusk was falling and Wanda switched on the lights behind their silk shades. She said, "You had fun in this room, didn't you? You had fun for seven years, right up to the last party, my farewell party. Do you remember?"

"Do I remember! Great speeches, we were so profound! It was June, I think, with the sun coming up at two in the morning. And I stood on the table and shouted, 'Skoal to the sun!' And there was a Russian sitting under the table singing. Where did he come from?"

"The Russian? I think he was one of those people we always included because we felt sorry for them. And there were a lot of those, way too many! But I always let them come. 'Bring them along,' I'd say. 'The more the merrier.' That's my principle. If you're having a party, then do it in style! We got twenty-two people in here, twenty-two. I counted. One of the best parties I've ever given for my friends."

"What do you mean?" Stella said. "It was my party!"

"Yes, yes, of course, if you like. I gave a farewell party for you, so of course, in a sense, it was your party. Then off you went on the morning train."

Yes, the morning train, Stella thought. Sebastian came with me to the train. A lovely summer morning . . . He promised he'd follow as soon as he'd sorted out his travel grant, as soon as I'd found us a studio, or a room, or a cheap hotel, anywhere we could work . . . He hardly ever had a fixed address, so I was to send the address to Wanda . . . Bye-bye, darling, take care of yourself! And the train whistled and rushed out into the world.

"Now, don't go upsetting yourself about my party, Stella. Though surely you haven't forgotten that I was the one who lived here. This was my home. Be honest, it was my place, wasn't it? Of course it was." Wanda laid her hand over Stella's and went on in a friendly voice. "Memory plays funny tricks. But don't worry about it; it's totally natural. You're every bit as welcome now as you were then. You were such a great help; you helped in so many ways, peeling onions and carrying out the garbage . . . And we included you in everything, our poor little Starry Eyes . . . Wait a second, there's the elevator . . ."

The sound of the elevator was very loud.

"Third floor," said Wanda. "Funny how often it goes to the

third floor. Yes, all the things we did back then, and now here you sit in your old spot, between Ingegerd and Tommi and me on the sofa, with Bennu opposite. Sebastian used to sit in the window. You all talked and talked about art—all you cared about was your work. And how many of you became famous, can you tell me that?"

"It's so easy to lose track of how your friends got on," Stella said.

"You don't know? Did none of them ever write to you? But Stella, sweetheart!"

Stella lit a cigarette. "I sent you my address and asked you to pass it on to my friends."

"Did you? Hang on, your cigarette's not lit. Here, this is a good lighter. You should start using a lighter; your hands have started to shake, just a little, just a tiny bit, nothing to worry about. Whatever. Well, Sebastian became quite famous, in a way. But you know how it is with great men; they forget the people who believed in them when they were a bit less great. Aren't you going to finish your wine?"

Stella said, "Do you know how he is? Do you know where he is?"

They heard the elevator again and sat quietly.

"Fourth floor," remarked Wanda. "Time to put on the spaghetti, I think. *Al burro*. With Parmesan these days! You like Parmesan?"

"Yes, thanks. Are you still at the council offices?"

"Certainly am, and looking forward to my pension like everyone else. I'm departmental manager now."

"Really? What do you do with the rest of your time? Same hobby? Still doing your gymnastics in the evenings?"

"In the evenings? You're mad. One doesn't dare go out on the streets after six o'clock in this city!" Wanda went to the little kitchen in the corner to put the water on to boil. She set the table.

"Would you like to see Jaska's photographs?"

It was a beautiful album full of bad photographs of a tight crowd of laughing young people—at a fancy-dress party, at the beach in a strong wind, on their way somewhere carrying easels —charming snapshots of no interest whatsoever except to those who were there at the time.

Stella said, “This was at Hanaholmen. I was standing beside Sebastian in my white dress. You can still see a bit of that dress.”

Wanda looked and said, “That wasn’t you, that was someone else. Light got in, so I had to cut off one corner. Do you use ketchup?”

“No, I don’t. Do you know where Sebastian is now?”

“I might. But the thing is, dear, it’s a secret. I promised not to give the address to anyone. Say what you like about me, I’m loyal to my friends. And anyway, it wasn’t Hanaholmen, it was Äggskär. And you weren’t even there that time. Memory’s funny, isn’t it? Some things just disappear and others you never forget. Are memories important to you? Be frank, think about it. Those days when everything was so easy for you. This room. You’d like to go back, wouldn’t you?”

“Not anymore,” said Stella. “I think the water’s boiling.”

But the water wasn’t boiling; the gas tokens had run out.

“I’m so sorry,” said Wanda. “Forgive me. I could go down and borrow some from Mrs. Lundblad, but she’s so unpleasant—”

“Never mind. She’s probably busy with the stairs.”

“You saw her? What did she say?”

“Well, we talked a bit about this and that.”

“But what did she say about me?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. She didn’t say a thing. It’s really hot in here, Wanda. Do you think we could open the window for a bit?”

The spring evening came into the room, cool and liberating.

“This window,” said Wanda. “I remember you standing here laughing, you and Sebastian. You were laughing at the rest of us, weren’t you? What was so funny? Who were you laughing at?”

Wanda’s voice, flat, insistent, and inescapable, was suddenly too much for Stella, and she lost her temper. “We weren’t laughing at anyone! Or we were laughing at all of you, at everything! Because we were happy! We looked at each other and laughed; it was fun. Is that so hard to understand?”

“But why are you so angry?” said Wanda, distressed.

“I’m tired. You talk too much.”

“Do I? Silly me, so thoughtless. And I can see you’re not feeling well. You’ve changed so much. Is something wrong? You can tell me. Stella. Come and sit here on the sofa. Did those photos upset

you? They're just innocent old memories for safekeeping."

"You're right—they're innocent. This studio was innocent in those days too. It was a place where everything was friendly and straightforward. We worked and we trusted each other, because everything was open and aboveboard. I think about this place when I'm having trouble getting to sleep."

"Trouble sleeping? That's not good. Not good at all. Listen, Stella, you're not yourself. Have you seen a doctor? I mean, this business of forgetting things . . . But that's probably not so serious, nothing to worry about."

"The elevator!" Stella yelled. "There it goes again. Wait till it stops!"

"That was the fourth floor."

Wanda closed the window and filled their glasses. She was still talking. "He bought me a record even though they cost a fortune. And the other artists would also bring me a record now and then. Little me . . . We used to dance. Till dawn. And you know what I'd do then? I'd get up on the table and drink a toast with all of you and shout, 'Skoal to the sun!' And when the party was over and everyone had gone home and there was only the two of us, Sebastian and me . . . Stella? How about a bit of music? An old 78 he gave me. 'Evening Blues.' "

"No, not right now." Stella had a headache, a nasty pain behind her eyes. The elevator started up again, almost right to the top. In this altered room she recognized only one thing: the bookcase. She reached out and touched it.

"I knocked that up in a single evening," Wanda said. "Pretty good, don't you think?"

Stella burst out, "That's not true! That's my old bookcase that I made with my own two hands!"

Wanda leaned back in her chair and smiled. "What a fuss about nothing! That old bookcase? Take it, it's yours, a present. But Stella, dear, I'm worried about you. Where did you lose your starry eyes? What's wrong, dear? Can't you tell me about it? And now another cigarette. You smoke too much. You don't look at all well. Take it easy, I beg you. Stop trying to remember the way things used to be; you just get sad and confused. That's it, isn't it? Tell me the truth. It makes you unhappy and confused. It was all so long ago now and, you know, the years haven't been kind to you. Anyway, what's so special about this old bookcase?

Nothing. Think about something pleasant. Remember Tommi? He was nice, and he fancied you. He'd say, 'We have to look after our little Starry Eyes. She's so docile, she swallows everything. She's our little rubbish bin: We fill her up and there's always room for more—' "

Stella broke in. "I don't think we should talk any more about those days. We could talk about what's happening now. Out there."

"What do you mean—out there?"

"Out in the world. The great upheavals, all the violent and important things going on everywhere all the time. We could talk about that." She could see that Wanda didn't understand, so she added, "The stuff we read about in the papers."

"I don't get a paper," said Wanda. "Anyway, Tommi liked you. All my friends liked you. Believe me, it's true. And it absolutely wasn't pity—"

"That elevator!" Stella burst out. "There it goes again!"

"So?"

"Are you expecting someone, or are you afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Burglars, Wanda, all the burglars who are going to come in and take your things!"

Wanda looked straight at her guest. "Don't be childish. No one can get in here." There was a moment's silence, then Wanda went on. "You remind me of someone, one of the ones we felt sorry for, who only came here to eat. She used to eat and eat and never say a word. Funny—she was like you. Poor thing. She used to follow me about everywhere. And you know what she said to me once? 'You're so strong,' she said. 'You're like a strong electric current. You make me move faster, you make me feel alive!' Then she disappeared. No one knew what happened to her and no one cared . . . Stella? What's the matter—don't you feel well?"

"No," said Stella, "I don't feel well. Do you have an aspirin?"

"Of course, right away . . . But darling, lie down on the sofa for a bit. No, I insist. You look terrible, you need to lie down. Don't talk. Just promise me you'll go for a proper checkup soon; it's so easy to do."

Stella felt a great urge to sleep; the room disappeared. The inescapable voice whispered on: "Are you comfortable? Here in

this room you're with me and you can forget and let go . . . All of them, they all come to my room, they stand waiting at the door and I hear them and let them in and they talk and talk . . . Worries, worries, worries . . . Then I talk, frankly and honestly. One has to be completely honest, doesn't one? Don't you agree? One needn't say so very much, but one has to weigh one's words, one must find just the right words; it's so important. But you're freezing! Hang on, let me tuck you up nice and cozy . . . No, no, let me look after you—I'm right, aren't I, about daring to be honest?"

Stella screamed, "Let me go!" But the blanket crept up over her face and the voice droned on: "I told him what I thought, what I honestly thought. I said, 'She's suffocating you, you have to get rid of her—' "

"The elevator!" Stella screamed, and for a moment the grip loosened. She jumped to her feet and ran to the middle of the room. Wanda was left sitting on the sofa. "Stella? What are you looking for?"

"My bag, my bag!"

Wanda laughed. "Well, I didn't steal it! It has to be here somewhere. I locked the door from the inside. Sit down and relax. I'll tell you how things are. Have a little more wine. No? Listen, being at home in your own room, where everything belongs to you and it's all there, everything that's happened and everything that's been said, it's all there, the walls are steeped in it, it's all around you like a warm cloak and it holds you tighter and tighter . . . Don't you believe me? I can prove it! I've got a recording. Please just listen and you'll understand."

There came an incomprehensible chaos of voices and shrill music. Wanda cried out, "You hear that? That proves it, doesn't it? There's a glass breaking—you hear that?"

Stella stood at the locked door holding her bag and coat. "Wanda, let me out! Let me go."

"No, don't go, please, don't go yet, stay a little longer, just a little while, it was all so long ago and there's still so much to talk about . . . What are you afraid of? It's not late, not at all, the streets aren't dangerous yet, not till later, but then you can take a taxi and I'll come down and make sure you get away all right . . . Stella? There's no need to worry, I mean if you've got a lot of money in your bag and you're scared of being robbed—"

“I’ve already been robbed,” said Stella. “Just let me out.”

Wanda came to the door and took her by the arm. “Stella? Is it the bookcase? Take it, please. I’d like you to have it! It’s so small, you can take it in a taxi. Don’t look at me like that, don’t be mean to me . . .” Her hand was still on Stella’s arm. Stella took it in her own and held it silently it until it was calm. Then Wanda unlocked the door and stood aside. Stella went down the stairs feeling wildly and inconsolably relieved. At the corner she turned to say goodbye but the door was already closed. “Evening Blues” began to play and then stopped again almost immediately.

A thick fog had descended over the city, the first spring fog. A good sign. It meant that soon, little by little, the ice would go.

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

TRAVELING LIGHT

I WISH I could describe the enormous relief I felt when they finally pulled up the gangway! Only then did I feel safe. Or, more exactly, when the ship had moved far enough from the quay for it to be impossible for anyone to call out . . . ask for my address, scream that something awful had happened . . . Believe me, you can't imagine my giddy sense of freedom. I unbuttoned my overcoat and took out my pipe but my hands were shaking and I couldn't light it; but I stuck it between my teeth anyway, because that somehow establishes a certain detachment from one's surroundings. I went as far forward as possible in the bows, from where it was impossible to see the city, and hung over the railing like the most carefree traveler you can imagine. The sky was light blue, the little clouds seemed whimsical, pleasantly capricious . . .

Everything was in the past now, gone, of no significance; nothing mattered anymore, no one was important. No telephone, no letters, no doorbell. Of course you have no idea what I'm referring to, but it doesn't matter anyway; in fact I shall merely assert that everything had been sorted out to the best of my ability, thoroughly taken care of down to the smallest detail. I wrote the letters I had to write—in fact, I'd done that as long ago as the day before, announcing my sudden departure without explanation and without in any way accounting for my behavior. It was very difficult; it took a whole day. Of course, I left no information about where I was going and indicated no time for my return, since I have no intention of ever coming back. The caretaker's wife will look after my houseplants; those tired living things—which never look well no matter how much trouble one takes over them—have made me feel very uneasy. Never mind: I shan't ever have to see them again.

Perhaps it might interest you to know what I packed? As little as possible! I've always dreamed of traveling light, a small weekend bag of the sort one can casually whisk along with oneself as one walks with rapid but unhurried steps through,

shall we say, the departure lounge of an airport, passing a mass of nervous people dragging along large heavy cases. This was the first time I'd succeeded in taking the absolute minimum with me, ruthless in the face of family treasures and those little objects one can become so attached to that remind one of . . . well, of emotional bits of one's life—no, that least of all! My bag was as light as my happy-go-lucky heart and contained nothing more than one would need for a routine night at a hotel. I left the flat without leaving instructions of any kind, but I did clean it, very thoroughly. I'm very good at cleaning. Then I turned off the electricity, opened the fridge, and unplugged the phone. That was the very last thing, the definitive step; now I'd done with them.

And during all this time the phone never rang once—a good omen. Not one, not a single one of all these, these—but I don't want to talk about them now, I'm not going to worry about them any more, no, they no longer occupy even a single second of my thoughts. Well, when I'd pulled out the phone plug and checked one last time that I had all the papers I needed in my pocketbook —passport, tickets, travelers' checks, pension card—I looked out of the window to make sure that there were some taxis waiting at the stand on the corner, shut the front door, and let the keys fall through the letterbox.

Out of old habit I avoided the elevator; I don't like elevators. On the second floor I tripped and grabbed hold of the banisters, and stood still a moment, suddenly hot all over. Think, just think —what if I'd really fallen, maybe sprained my ankle or worse? Everything would have been in vain, fatal, irreparable. It would have been unthinkable to get ready and gather myself together to leave a second time. In the taxi I felt so exhilarated I carried on a lively conversation with the driver, commenting on the early spring weather and taking an interest in this and that relating to his profession, but he hardly responded at all. I pulled myself together, because this was exactly what I'd decided to avoid; from now on I was going to be a person who never took any interest in anyone. The problems that might face a taxi driver were nothing to do with me. We reached the boat much too early, he lifted out my bag, I thanked him and gave him too big a tip. He didn't smile, which upset me a bit, but the man who took my ticket was very friendly.

My journey had started. It gradually got cold on deck; there was hardly anyone else there and I presumed the other passengers must have made their way to the restaurant. Taking my time, I went to find my cabin. I saw at once that I wasn't going to be alone; someone had left a coat, pocketbook, and umbrella on one of the bunks, and two elegant suitcases were standing in the middle of the floor. Discreetly, I moved them out of the way. Of course I had demanded, or more accurately expressed a desire to have, a cabin to myself; sleeping on my own has become very important to me and on this journey in particular it was absolutely essential for me to, so to speak, savor my new independence entirely undisturbed. I couldn't possibly go and complain to the purser, who would have merely pointed out that the boat was full, that it was a regrettable misunderstanding, and that if the misunderstanding were to be rectified I would be aware all night as I lay on my solitary bunk that the man who was to have shared my cabin was having to spend the night sleepless on a deck chair.

I noticed that his toilet articles were of exclusive quality, and I was particularly impressed by his light-blue electric toothbrush and a miniature case with the monogram A.C. on it. I unpacked my own toothbrush and the other things I had considered necessary from my ascetic point of view, laid out my pajamas on the other bunk, and asked myself if I was hungry. The thought of the likely crush in the restaurant put me off, so I decided to skip dinner and have a drink in the bar instead. The bar was pretty empty this early in the evening. I sat down on one of the high stools, propped my feet on the traditional metal railing which runs around every bar on the Continent, and lit my pipe.

"A Black and White, please," I said to the bartender, accepting the glass with a brief nod and making clear with my attitude that I had no inclination for conversation. I sat and pondered the Idea of Travel; that is to say, the act of traveling unfettered and with no responsibility for what one has left behind and without any opportunity to foresee what may lie ahead and prepare for it. Nothing but an enormous sense of peace.

It occurred to me to think back over my earlier journeys, every one of them, and I realized to my astonishment that this must be the first time I had ever traveled alone. First came my trips with my mother—Majorca and the Canaries. Majorca again. After

mother went away I traveled with cousin Herman to Lübeck and Hamburg. He was only interested in museums, though they depressed him; he'd never been able to study painting and he couldn't get over it. Not a happy trip. Then the Wahlströms, who didn't know whether to divorce or not and thought it would be easier to travel as a threesome.

Where did we go . . . ? Oh, yes, of course, Venice. And during the mornings they quarreled. No, that wasn't much of a journey. What next? A trip with a party to Leningrad. It was damn cold . . . And then Aunt Hilda, who needed a break but didn't dare go by herself . . . but that was only as far as Mariehamn; we went to the Maritime Museum there, I remember. You see, when I went through all my life's journeys in my thoughts, any fear I possibly could have had that the way I'd decided to do things might not be right disappeared. I turned to the bartender, said, "Another, please," and looked around the bar, very much at ease. People had started coming in; happy well-fed people who ordered coffee and drinks to their tables and crowded around me at the bar.

Normally I very much dislike crowds and do everything I can to avoid being involved with them, even on buses and trams, but that evening it felt pleasant and sociable to be one among many, almost secure. An elderly gentleman with a cigar intimated with a discreet gesture that he needed my ashtray. "Of course, don't mention it," I responded and was on the point of begging his pardon but remembered in time: I'd finished with all that kind of thing. In an entirely matter-of-fact way, if with a certain nonchalance, I moved the ashtray to his side and calmly studied myself in the mirror behind the bottles in the bar.

There's something special about a bar, don't you think? A place for chance happenings, for possibilities to become reality, a refuge on the awkward route from should to must. But, I must confess, not the sort of place I've much frequented. Now, as I sat and looked in the mirror, my face suddenly seemed rather agreeable.

I suppose I had never allowed myself time to look closely at the appearance time has given me. A thin face with somewhat surprised but frankly beautiful eyes, hair admittedly gray but luxuriant in an almost artistic manner, with a lock hanging down over my brow giving me an expression of—what shall we say—anxious watchfulness? Watchful concern? No. Just watchfulness.

I emptied my glass and suddenly felt an urgent need to communicate, but held it in check. At all events, despite everything, wasn't this precisely an occasion when, at last, I would not be forced to listen but could be allowed to talk myself, freely and recklessly? Among men, in a bar? For example, entirely in passing of course, I might let slip information about my decisive contribution at the Post Office. But no. Absolutely not. Be secretive—don't make confidences; at most, drop hints . . .

Sitting on my left was a young man who seemed extremely restless. He kept moving his position, turning this way and that on his stool and seemingly trying to keep an eye on everything that was happening in the room. I turned to the neighbor on my other side and said, "Very crowded this evening. Looks like we're in for a calm crossing." He stubbed his cigar in the ashtray and remarked that the boat was full and that our wind speed was eight meters per second, though they'd forecast it would get stronger during the night. I liked his calm matter-of-fact manner and asked myself whether he was retired and why he should be on his way to London. Let me tell you, my interest surprised myself; nothing has become so completely foreign, almost hateful to me, to be avoided at all costs, as curiosity and sympathy, any disposition to encourage in the slightest degree the surrounding world's irresistible need to start talking about its troubles. This is something I really do know about; during a long life I've heard most things and I've brought this entirely on myself. But, as I've said, I was sitting in a bar on the way to my new freedom—and I was being a bit careless.

He said, "You're going to London? On business?"

"No. Sea travel amuses me."

He nodded in appreciation. I could see his face in the mirror, a rather heavy face somewhat the worse for wear with a drooping mustache and tired eyes. He seemed elegant, expensively dressed, Continental, if you know what I mean.

"When I was young," he said, "I worked out that it should be possible to travel by sea all the time, without stopping, meals included, for very much less than it costs to live in a city."

I watched him, fascinated, waiting for him to go on, but he said nothing more. Thank goodness, this was clearly not a man to make personal confidences. Meanwhile, soft music was throbbing

persistently somewhere up in the ceiling and people had begun talking with increasing animation, while trays heavily laden with glasses were being carried with impressive speed and precision between the tables. I thought: 'Here I am sitting with an experienced traveler, a man who has taken the best from life and knows what he's talking about.' It was then he took out his pocketbook and showed me pictures of his family and his dog. That was a warning signal. A sharp sense of disappointment pierced me—but why should I be surprised if my companion was showing signs of behaving exactly like all the others? But I'd decided not to let anything whatever upset me, so I looked at his snapshots and said all the usual nice things. His wife, children, grandchildren, and dog looked more or less just as one would expect, except that they seemed in an unusually flourishing condition.

He sighed—of course, I couldn't hear him sigh in all that din, but I saw his broad shoulders rise and fall. Clearly not all was as it should be at home. I know; it's the same with them all. Even this most elegant, cigar-smoking traveler with his gold lighter and his family posing in front of his swimming pool—even him! I hurriedly began talking about the first thing that came into my head, the advantages of traveling light, and made up my mind to detach myself gradually from the man; I mean, get away as quickly as possible without seeming brusque. I dropped a hint by taking out my cabin key, laying it beside my glass, and trying to catch the bartender's attention, naturally without success—the crush around the bar was worse than ever, increasingly impatient and loud, and the poor man was working like a maniac.

"Two Black and Whites," said my travel companion in a low voice but with the sort of calm, powerful authority that ensures immediate results. He fixed his heavy gaze on me and raised his glass. Now I was caught.

"Thanks," I said. "How nice—a little nightcap. It's getting quite late, I think."

He answered, "Not at all, Mr. Melander. My name's Connaugh." And he laid his cabin key beside mine. "An incredible coincidence," I exclaimed, most put out.

"Oh no. I saw you coming out of the cabin. Your bag's very neatly labeled."

Suddenly I was jostled by the young man on my left as he

leaned aggressively forward across the bar to demand a Cuba Libre. He'd now had to ask three times but, no, everyone else must come first. Typical, just what you'd expect . . . Mr. Connaugh gave the youngster a very brief and very cold glance and said, "It seems to be time to get out of this place." But any relief I felt was destroyed by his next words: "I've got some whiskey in the cabin and the night is long."

What could I do? Say I needed something to eat? He would merely have waited for me in the cabin. Now I could see him clearly: a forceful, dominating man who radiated unshakable determination. Naturally I wanted to share the bill, but he dismissed the matter with a gesture and moved towards the door. I followed. We got into a crowded lift. The boat was teeming with people flocking around the fruit machines and sitting on the stairs. Their children were running all over the place and I was overcome by my old fear of crowds; when we finally reached the cabin I was trembling from head to foot. Mr. Connaugh moved his luggage aside and took out a bottle of whiskey, which he placed on the little table under the window. He had two silver cups as well. When he sat down the bunk creaked; it seemed altogether too puny and fragile for him. The cabin was first class, a bit of self-indulgence I'd allowed myself for this trip but which should have been reserved for me alone. It had a minibar, an elegant little arrangement which contained soft drinks, chips and salted nuts. I opened its door.

"No," said Mr. Connaugh, "not mineral water. Drink your whiskey with plain water like the Scots. My father came from Scotland." I hurried to the bathroom and filled my toothmug, stumbling a little in the doorway, which had an unusually high threshold. "Ice?" I asked.

He shook his head. When he'd poured a little water into his whiskey, he leaned back and drank. My voyage had suddenly been altered and my peace destroyed. I was sure he wouldn't go to bed for hours. "To you," he said. Everything repeats itself. "To you," I said.

"Journeys, journeys, forwards and backwards. And you know exactly where you're going, every time. Home and away again, away and home again."

"Not necessarily," I objected. "There are times—" But he interrupted me.

I'd thought of telling him that, so far as I was concerned, I hadn't booked any hotel and had no idea where I was going to end up. I wanted to give him a fairly adventurous picture of my new, virtually self-centered freedom, but he'd already launched into an account of his worries: wife, children, grandchildren, house, and dog, the last-named having clearly died in very distressing circumstances. I closed up completely. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I effectively managed to shut off that dreadful compassion that has given both myself and those around me such fearful trouble. I use that word deliberately: fearful. Now perhaps you can understand why I started on my journey? Perhaps you have some idea of the depth of my fatigue, of my exhaustion and nausea in the face of this constant need to feel sorry for people?

Of course, one can't help feeling sorry for people. Every single one of us is afflicted by some secret, insurmountable disappointment, some form of anxiety or shame, and they sniff me out in no time. I mean, they know, their sense of smell leads them to me . . . Well, that's why I cleared off.

As I half listened to Mr. Connaugh I felt an enormous, and for me unaccustomed, anger gradually creeping over me. I emptied my glass and brutally interrupted him by saying, "Well, what d'you expect? Clearly you've driven them away by spoiling them. Or by scaring them! Why not let them be free to do what they want?" Maybe it was the effect of the whiskey or whatever, but I added firmly: "Let go of them. The whole lot. And the house too!" But he was hardly listening and the photographs in his pocketbook had appeared again.

Sometimes all manifestations of human anxiety seem very similar to me—at least, the everyday matters that people continue to worry about when, so to speak, rain is no longer coming in through the roof, there is no shortage of food, and no one is being physically threatened—if you understand what I mean. Over and above factual catastrophes, miseries of one sort or another seem to repeat themselves with rather monotonous regularity so far as I've noticed: he or she is unfaithful or bored, someone's no longer enjoying their work, ambitions or dreams have gone out of shape, time's rapidly getting shorter, one's family is behaving in an incomprehensible and frightening way, a friendship has been totally poisoned by something trivial. One is

frantically busy with inessentials, while what is important and irreparable goes from bad to worse, duty and blame nibble away at us and the whole syndrome is vaguely labeled angst, a spiritual malaise one seldom succeeds in defining or even tries to define. I know. One's opportunities for feeling ill at ease in life are countless and I recognize them; they constantly return, each affliction in its own little compartment. I should be familiar with this state of affairs and by now I should have found the right answer to the problem, but I haven't. There is no practical answer, is there? So we just listen. And anyway, it seems no one is really interested in practical solutions; they just go on talking, they come back and talk about the same thing again and again, they won't let you go. And here I was now sitting with Mr. Connaugh, desperately trying not to feel sorry for him. It was going to be rather a long journey. At that particular moment he was holding forth about his misunderstood childhood.

The boat had begun to roll, but not too badly. I never get seasick, but I announced very clearly, "Mr. Connaugh, I don't feel very well."

"Not Mr. Connaugh," he said. "Albert. Didn't I say you should call me Albert? Well, that angst I was talking about—"

"Albert, I'm afraid I'm going to have to go up on deck. I need a little air; I'm not feeling well."

"No problem," he said. "What you need is a straight whiskey now—instantly. And you can have all the air you want." He attacked our window—you know, the sort of cabin window they screw down firmly with goodness knows what kind of screw apparatus—but he got it open and a violent and extremely wet rush of ice-cold air took my breath away and blew the curtains horizontal while my glass fell to the floor. "Not bad," he said, much revived himself. "I've fixed it. Did you know I once dreamed of being a boxer? Now you'll feel better."

I reached for my overcoat.

"Albert," I said, "what is it you actually do?"

"Business," he answered shortly. My question had clearly depressed him again. There was a long silence. We raised our glasses to each other. Every now and then, salt spray drenched the table. I tried to say something funny about getting extra water in our drinks but it fell flat. To my horror I noticed Mr. Connaugh's eyes were full of tears and his face was distorted.

“You don’t know,” he said. “You don’t know how it feels . . .”

It’s when they start crying that I’m done for. I promise them anything—my friendship for life, money (though naturally not in this case), my bed—to undertake the most disagreeable tasks, and if it’s a big strong man who’s weeping . . . I get desperate. I leaped up and proposed God knows what—the nightclub, the swimming pool, anything—but the boat rolled, making me lose my balance so that I was flung violently against Mr. Connaugh. He grabbed me like a drowning man and leaned his great head on my shoulder. It was terrible. From many points of view my position was extremely awkward. I’ve never known anything like it. Luckily the boat gave an enormous lurch at that moment and a lot of water came in through the window. Moving with lightning speed, Mr. Connaugh rescued his bottle and set about screwing down the window as best he could. I rushed out into the corridor and escaped in blind flight through the bewildering open spaces of the boat.

When I eventually stopped, utterly exhausted, I was almost alone and it was completely silent. I looked in through an open door. Deck-places. Of course, a large room full of low chairs, most of them already tipped backwards for the night. A large number of deck passengers lying asleep rolled in blankets. I went in, very carefully picked up a spare blanket, and chose a chair as far off as possible, against the wall. Wonderful. To be able to sleep and sink into silence, oblivious of everything . . . I’d developed a terrible headache and I was very wet, but that was nothing, nothing at all. I pulled the blanket over my head and vanished into a total disinterested peace.

When I woke I had no idea where I was. Someone was trying to pull the blanket off me and kept saying that it was her chair, it was number thirty-one and it was her chair and she had a ticket to prove it . . . I sat up, dazed and confused, and began saying, “Excuse me. I mean, it was a misunderstanding and the lighting’s so bad, I really am very sorry . . .”

“Don’t mention it,” said the woman sourly. “I’m used to misunderstandings, that’s exactly what they’re always called.”

My headache had got even worse and I was freezing cold. As far as I could see, nearly all the chairs were already occupied by sleeping people, so I just sat down on the floor and tried to massage my neck. “Haven’t you got a ticket?” asked the woman

severely.

"No."

"Have you lost it? This part of the boat's full, too."

I said nothing. Perhaps they'd let me sleep on the floor.

"Why are you wet?" she asked. "You smell of whiskey. My son Herbert drinks whiskey. Once he fell in the lake."

She sat and watched me with my blanket up under my chin. She was a bony little gray-haired woman, tanned and with small sharp eyes. She'd put her hat by her feet. She went on: "My suitcase is over there. Please bring it here if you can. It's best to have your things close beside you in a place like this. Mind the cake box. That's for Herbert."

Afterwards, more people came in, looking for their chairs. The boat was rolling violently and not far off someone was being sick into a bag.

"It'll be different in London," said the old woman, pulling her suitcase nearer. "I just need to find out where Herbert is right now. D'you know where you have to go to find out people's addresses?"

"No," I said. "But perhaps the purser—"

"Are you going to sleep on the floor all night?"

"Yes. I'm very tired."

"I can understand." She added, "Whiskey's expensive." And a little later: "Have you got any food in you?"

"No."

"I thought as much. There was food in the grill. But it was too expensive for me."

I huddled on the floor, buttoned up my overcoat, and tried to sleep. It didn't work. How could this person go all the way to London without even knowing her son's address? And they'd be sure to stop her when she landed; these days you had to give references and prove you had enough money before they'd let you in . . . Where was she from? Somewhere in the country . . . She'd baked a cake for that son of hers . . . My God, how helpless and unpractical can you get!

I slept for a bit and woke again. She was snoring and had thrown an arm over the edge of the chair, her hand looked tired, a wrinkled brown hand with broad wedding and engagement rings. Now lots of people were being sick here and there around the room and the stench was frightful. I decided to go up on

deck. My old dislike of elevators came over me at that moment, so I went up the stairs and passed the grill. People were still sitting and eating there. I hesitated a moment, then bought several large sandwiches and a bottle of beer and went back down the stairs and managed to find the place I'd just come from. She was awake.

"No, but that was really kind," she said and immediately attacked the sandwiches. "Won't you have half?" But I wasn't hungry any more, and sat thinking about how much money she might need to be allowed to land. Wasn't there some sort of Christian hostel that looked after confused travelers? I must find the purser; perhaps he would know . . .

"My name's Emma Fagerberg," she said.

The person lying on the next chair emerged from under a blanket and said, "Shut up! I'm trying to sleep."

The other pulled out her handbag from under her pillow. "You've been so kind," whispered Mrs. Emma Fagerberg. "I'll show you some photos of my son. This is what Herbert looked like when he was four. The picture's a little blurred, but I have several others which are much better . . ."

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

WEST OF Alicante, one day in February, Professor Viktoria Johansson arrived in the mountain village where she had arranged to stay at her goddaughter Elisabeth's house. The village was small and very old, with narrow close-built houses that climbed up the side of the mountain just as they did on the picturesque postcards Elisabeth sent her from time to time.

It had been a long, tiring journey. Viktoria was a little disappointed that Elisabeth wasn't there to meet her at the airport as agreed. Perhaps not so much disappointed as astonished—they had been planning this trip for so long, and with such great anticipation. There was no doorbell. Viktoria knocked but there was no response, except that two multicolored cats slunk down from a wall and meowed. So she took Elisabeth's spare keys from her handbag, unlocked the door, and went through into a patio. Not a large one, but it looked exactly the way a patio should—a yard paved with stone, plants in neat rows of bulging clay pots, and over her head a roof of light greenery. Viktoria put down her bags and said to herself, "Aha. A patio." It was reassuring. It precisely matched her dream of this remote foreign country. As Elisabeth wasn't at home, Viktoria unlocked the next door. The room seemed very dark after the strong sunshine. Its single window was small and framed a view of bright green leaves and oranges. You could lean out and pick one, thought the weary Viktoria—if, in fact, it really was Elisabeth's tree and not the neighbor's. There was total silence. Now she saw that the room was in great disorder—clothes, papers, the remains of a meal, everywhere signs of anxiety and haste—and in the middle of the table, a letter.

She read it without sitting down: "Dear Godmother, Just heard that mother is seriously ill, catching a plane immediately. Hope you can manage, terribly sorry to leave you like this. If the gas canister runs out, José at the café in the square can help, also with firewood, he speaks a little French. In haste, love Elisabeth. P.S. Would have written but it wouldn't have reached you in

time."

Poor child, thought Viktoria—with Hilda going and falling ill right at this moment. But she was rather frail even all those years ago. The hills were too much for her, that time we went to Scotland. That must have been 19 . . . Anyway, we were very young. Such a whiny companion. We used to talk about going to "the land where the lemon trees bloom," or to Spain. I'll write to her. And to Elisabeth. But there's no rush, one thing at a time. I wonder how you light the gas.

She took off her hat. Sitting on a straight-backed chair in Hilda's severe whitewashed room, she tried to remember more about her childhood friend. But Hilda grew hazier and hazier, hardly more than a little prick of conscience. She lit her third cigarette of the day and busied herself studying the window with the oranges.

Viktoria Johansson had been a very popular teacher in her day. She had known how to hold people's attention. Her sudden silences had nothing to do with absentmindedness; they indicated the shaping of some idea that needed to be presented with absolute clarity. Later, too, at the university where she lectured on Nordic philology, she commanded great respect, despite her mildness and total inability to find fault or control her papers and notes, which she was constantly losing or leaving behind. Perhaps what disarmed her students was her impractical helplessness and the invariable benevolence that misinterpreted every attempt at opposition or mockery. Even at a distance she inspired a sense of security, a small stable figure approaching calmly in snub-nosed shoes. She liked to go about in a trench coat and roomy, comfortable clothes, though she did have a chinchilla evening cape and real pearls. She would wear her pearl necklace whenever students came to visit her at home.

Even before she taught at the university she'd been in the habit of giving a little party for her pupils once a week. In those days she served hot chocolate and pastries; later they got martinis and olives and were allowed to bring a friend if they liked. There were those who thought it was all a bit over the top, but they gave in to Viktoria's utter lack of pretension. She wasn't there to be judged; just observed and accepted.

When young people came to Viktoria's parties, they would make bets about what it would be that she'd need their help

with. It became a kind of game. Maybe she couldn't get the cork out of a bottle of vermouth, or maybe the flat was too dark because a fuse had blown and she didn't know how to fix it, or there would be a window she couldn't close, or an important paper had slipped down behind the bookcase. It was with a certain tenderness that they would sort things out, then laugh and say, "Dear old Viktoria!" Elisabeth had perhaps not been one of her best students, but she was very sweet and lovable.

Elisabeth had gotten Hilda's room upstairs ready for Viktoria—a dressing gown spread out on the bed, a spray of almond blossom, an ashtray. And, most thoughtful of all, an Erle Stanley Gardner. The dear child had not forgotten Viktoria's weakness for murder mysteries.

This window too was very small, but from here she could see the terraces climbing the mountainside higher and higher with long curving pink-and-white rows of flowering almond trees. Elisabeth had explained to her how the terraces held the soil in place and how they had been maintained for hundreds of years; though nowadays not many people knew how to build walls the old way, every stone fitted into place without mortar like the finest intarsia. Viktoria was particularly interested in walls. Once, out at the seashore at home, she had tried to repair a stone pier, but if you're not good with your hands then, sadly, you're just not.

There was one more little staircase. It led up to a rooftop terrace, from where the wide landscape's incredible beauty suddenly opened out. Mountain ranges rose all around in massive majesty, so that from here in the deep bowl of the valley, Viktoria felt no larger than a flea. A dramatic landscape, enormous and enclosed. What effect did it have on human beings? It was so utterly solitary. She stood still and listened, gradually becoming aware of how the silence was accentuated by never being absolute: Now and then a dog barked, a car passed on the road below the village, church bells rang a long way off. Points of comparison, she thought, like the way the ocean grows larger if there are islands breaking the horizon. We need contrast, she told herself. And now, I think this taxing day has gone on long enough. I won't unpack or make myself anything to eat. I'll just go to bed.

Viktoria slept peacefully, her dreams great images full of

mystery. Cocks started crowing before dawn; it sounded like there were a lot of them in the village. Then it was morning. The room was horribly cold, especially the stone floor. She put on all the woolen clothes she had and went downstairs. She opened the window with the oranges, leaned out and took an orange in her hand, but could not bring herself to pick it—somehow it felt wrong. Better to have a cup of tea.

Thank goodness the gas worked; the canister wasn't empty. There was another device, maybe something to do with hot water. Viktoria carefully turned a knob and it sprang into action with an alarming hiss, so she switched it off again and made her tea. The refrigerator was full of neat little plastic packages. She opened one but, suspecting it contained deep-frozen squid, she hastily closed it again. The jam jar looked just the way it should. Perhaps it was the ordinariness of the jam jar that disturbed her; she was intruding in someone else's life, in another woman's refrigerator, her bed, her distressed departure. I'm being selfish. What do I know about Elisabeth? There was a safety razor in the bathroom: Perhaps a man had to move out because of me.

Viktoria put on her hat and coat, poured a saucer of milk for the cats, and went out. The morning was chilly; the sun had barely risen above the crest of the mountain. The village street ended in the square, a pretty little place with a pump in the middle and several trees which had not yet put out leaves; she must find out what they were. Plane trees perhaps? There was the shop, and José's Café and a big yellow letterbox that seemed a safe and homely object to Viktoria. She needed to buy stamps somewhere and send scenic postcards to some of her old students. All the doors were still closed. An old man crossed the square and they greeted each other. I live here now, thought Viktoria with a little thrill of pleasure, and people say hello to me when they pass . . . Everything's going to be all right.

Back in the shade of the patio she buried herself in her *Guide for Tourists: Useful Phrases*: "Please. I'm sorry. Excuse me. Where can I find a shoeshine, tailor, souvenir shop, beauty salon?"

At twelve there was a knock on the door and a young man came in with a toolbox, smiled, and explained something Viktoria didn't understand. Then he began making a large hole in the wall. It's funny, you think you've learned all these fine and useful things to say in Spanish, but when you need them they all

just vanish. She gave the young man some of Elisabeth's wine and a cigarette and fussed around him until the hole was finished. Then he left. A little later he came back, and with another nice smile presented Viktoria with an entire mimosa bush. She was overcome. Mimosa was a thing you bought in tiny sprigs for people's birthdays. It was as if this foreign land had accepted her. It was unbelievable—she must remember to tell Elisabeth.

Now the young man filled the hole with plaster. Then he cleared up after himself, looked at her, and laughed.

"Very good work," said Viktoria shyly. "Very, very good."

When there was a knock on the door the next day, Viktoria thought the young man must have come back, perhaps to do more work on the wall, but it was a red-haired woman who spoke English and was looking for Elisabeth. She had four small dogs.

"How nice!" exclaimed Viktoria. "Please do come in! What a lot of little dogs. Do sit down. I'm so sorry, Elisabeth isn't here; the poor child has had to go home because her mother's been taken ill. I'm her godmother, Viktoria Johansson. May I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Josephine O'Sullivan," said the visitor. "Thanks, but maybe not tea, I don't want to put you to any trouble. But Elisabeth usually has some wine in her kitchen cupboard."

Viktoria went and looked in Elisabeth's cupboard and found half a bottle of whiskey.

The dogs were lying close beside Josephine's chair, and after a while two of them jumped up on her lap.

"Cheers," said Viktoria, who didn't like whiskey. "Have you lived here long, Miss O'Sullivan?"

"Only a year. But most of the colony have been here much longer."

"The colony?"

"Yes, the English colony. And a few Americans. It's so cheap here."

"And so beautiful," added Viktoria. "So peaceful; a real paradise!"

Josephine laughed, screwing up her small face which made her look older. She pushed the dogs off her lap and emptied her glass.

“They seem very attached to you,” Viktoria said. “Would you like a little more?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“A cigarette?”

“Thanks, I’ve got my own.” Josephine said nothing for a long time. She lit her cigarette, drew on it several times, then stubbed it out irritably in the ashtray. “Paradise, you say. We’ve our snakes here too, you know! It’s not safe to walk about in the village anymore. And no one does anything about it.”

“But the Spaniards—” Viktoria began.

Josephine interrupted impatiently. “You wouldn’t understand,” she said. “But please, don’t you worry about it.”

One of the dogs jumped up on her lap again, while the others squeezed in under her chair.

Viktoria said, “I’m so sorry Elisabeth’s not here. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No. You wouldn’t understand.”

Several motorcycles passed, then it was quiet again.

Suddenly Josephine broke out vehemently, “No one cares! No one!”

The smallest dog started barking.

“Sit!” Josephine shouted. “Sit! You and your paradise! If someone had sworn to kill you, how would you feel!?”

Now all the dogs began yapping.

Viktoria said, “Don’t you think we ought to let them out?”

When she had taken the dogs to the patio and come back, her visitor was standing at the window with her back to the room. Viktoria waited.

“Her name is Smith,” Josephine continued, speaking quietly with her lips pressed together. “Smith, if you please. She goes around the village brandishing a knife and threatening to murder me. And she lives right next door to me with only a single wall between us! She hates dogs and stereos, she sticks threatening letters under my door and makes faces at my cleaning woman, and last week she cut down my mimosa! I went to the police but they said they can’t do anything until something has actually happened, in other words, until I’m lying there with my throat cut!”

“Was it a large mimosa?” Viktoria asked.

Josephine gave her an angry look. “A meter high,” she

snapped.

"And what do the dogs have to say about it?"

"They bark, of course."

"My dear Miss O'Sullivan, let's not be too hasty. Murder is a very big word; it should only be used with care and forethought. It's quite chilly in here. What about a fire? I think Elisabeth has some firewood out on the patio."

The wood turned out to be big chunks of olive and some sort of hairy brushwood. Josephine got the fire lit and it burned with an intense blue flame.

"It burns so beautifully," said Viktoria. "Differently. Not like at home."

Josephine stood still and gazed into the fire. "No," she said, "not like at home."

Viktoria remembered times when students had come to her to talk about something terrible that had happened to them. It used to help a bit to let them light a fire in her tiled stove.

"Miss O'Sullivan," she said, "I want to think seriously about your problem and try and find a way to help you. But you'll have to let me give it some careful thought."

Josephine turned to Viktoria. Her whole bearing changed and relaxed. The tension went out of her face and she whispered, "Will you really help me? Seriously? I can count on it, can't I?"

"Of course you can," said Viktoria. "This has to be dealt with. But right now you go home and think about something else." She was on the point of adding, "Read a nice murder mystery." But she caught herself at the last moment.

When Josephine and her dogs had gone, Viktoria took out paper and a pen, lit a cigarette, and settled down in front of the fire. She felt quite revived. First she wrote "The Josephine Case," then after thinking a bit changed it to "The Woman with the Knife."

1. I shall call the woman with the knife X, which is better than Smith. Is it X or J who's demented? Or both? (NB: Police no good, they won't help.)
2. Find out if it's legal in Spain to run about threatening people with knives. She could at least be fined for disorderly conduct but that might make her even more belligerent. What sort of knife has she chosen? Stiletto? Kitchen knife?

This would seem to be an important detail, at least psychologically. What do I know about X? Nothing.

3. Motive. Dogs and stereo aren't enough; there must be something else, something more significant. Discover the motive.

4. Method. Must make contact with X. Is this urgent? Or is J being melodramatic? Have a word with José, but be diplomatic.

The fire burned well, and the room was soon hot.

Viktoria decided since everyone here took a siesta in the middle of the day, she could do the same with a clean conscience. An excellent custom that should be introduced in Scandinavia.

She paid José a visit at the café. She gave him her card and presented his wife with a box of chocolates originally meant for Elisabeth. While José served her coffee, she talked a little about the weather and the beauty of the landscape and asked him if he had any contact with the foreigners in the village.

He shrugged his shoulders. "They keep to themselves," he said. "Pensioners. Mostly women, you understand, they live longer."

"What do they do with themselves?"

"They go to parties at each other's houses," said José with a grin.

Viktoria mentioned that she had the name of one of the women, a Miss Smith, and that maybe she would call on her one day.

"Really?" said José. "You actually mean it?" He turned to his wife, who was standing behind the counter listening: "Catalina, have you heard the news; the professor here is going to call on Miss Smith!"

"God help her," said Catalina. "She'll never get into the house."

Viktoria had to climb a horribly long flight of steps to reach the building where Josephine lived right next door to X. When she got there, she sat down on a low wall with her Spanish phrasebook and waited. It was a very long time before she saw X come out of her house, lock the door, and stand still as if unsure which way to go. She had a shopping bag with her, so presumably was on her way to the shop. She was very small and didn't look particularly dangerous, just gloomy. Her hair was

gray and she had made no effort whatsoever to do it up. No sign of a knife. Finally she came towards Viktoria.

"Excuse me," said Viktoria. "I'm not feeling at all well. Where could I get a little water?"

"There's a pump in the square," X answered, her eyes suspicious and very dark.

"But I'm not sure I can make it that far. It's the heat—I'm not used to it."

And so Viktoria got into the narrow little house where X lived. Now she really did feel ill, for she wasn't used to telling lies.

X placed a glass of water in front of her and went back to the door. After a while she asked if Viktoria was feeling better.

"I'm afraid not," said Viktoria truthfully. "I'm so sorry, you've been very kind, but couldn't you sit down with me for a moment? I hope I haven't got sunstroke . . ."

X sat down on a chair near the door.

"I'm not used to the heat," Viktoria went on. "Do you know if anyone else in the colony has had sunstroke?"

"No," said X scornfully. "But if they had, it wouldn't surprise me. Half the time they do nothing but sunbathe."

"And the other half?"

"Parties. You'll find out. They drink cocktails and gossip and jabber away about nothing at all. Another week and you'll be right at the center of it, you're just the sort they like."

"Dear me," said Viktoria. "It sounds dreadful."

X put down her shopping bag and spoke with quiet intensity. "Yes, it is dreadful. They invade one deserted house after another and fix them up. All mod cons inside—but the outside has to look primitive and romantic. These people and their easy lives! They swarm like hornets with their cars and their lapdogs. Like a plague of locusts! I've been here from the start, twenty years. I've seen it all! They undermine everything."

"Like fig trees," said Viktoria.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Fig trees. My goddaughter Elisabeth told me that fig trees have roots that spread a very long way and can destroy walls and roads, whatever. They crowd out everything else."

"Exactly," said X. "They crowd out everything else. You just don't know where you belong anymore." She got up and stood waiting by the door.

On her way home Viktoria tried to imagine what it must feel like to be a total outsider. This was not a new problem to her. Students excluded from the lives of their fellow students used to come and ask her what to do. Very disturbing, really complicated. She tore up her notes about The Woman with the Knife. But the case was by no means solved; it had just entered a new phase.

Next morning Josephine arrived with all her dogs, and before she was even through the door burst out, “Professor, dear Professor Viktoria. I heard you’ve been to see her. What did she say about me?”

“Nothing.”

“But she must have said something!”

Viktoria patted the smallest, most neurotic dog and said, “I think she’s just terribly lonely.”

“Is that all?” said Josephine, raising her voice. “She’s lonely—is that all you’ve found out? I could have told you that at the start. But why does she hate me in particular, that’s what I want to know!”

“My dear Miss O’Sullivan,” said Viktoria, “calm down. I’m only just beginning this investigation.” And then she was angry with herself. Investigation, she thought, such a pretentious word. I’ve been reading too many murder mysteries . . . She went on quickly, “People get hold of the wrong end of the stick, you know, often for some very unimportant reason—say a disappointment—and then the problem just grows and grows till it’s out of control—”

Josephine grew vehement. “Are you defending her? What are you trying to tell me? All right, she’s lonely! That’s not my fault! You promised—”

“Yes I know, I promised. Sit down. How about a little whiskey?”

“Maybe a small one,” said Josephine angrily. “But just a very small one. I’m on my way to the Wainwrights.”

“They’re having a party?”

“Yes, they’re having a party.”

“Listen to me,” said Viktoria. “I’ve been looking for a motive and I think I’ve found one. She’s made you into some sort of symbol.”

But Josephine wasn’t listening. She was talking about Lady

Oldfield, who would very much like to invite the professor to her reception next Thursday, an intellectual gathering, just the inner circle. They were not all averse to enlarging the colony.

Then invite X, thought Viktoria angrily. I want no part of their colony. They can enlarge it some other way.

Suddenly Josephine stopped talking and stared at Viktoria. "What's wrong?" she said. "Why are you looking at me like that? Don't you want to help me anymore?"

"Of course I do. But try to understand. Miss Smith has serious problems—"

"I see," Josephine interrupted. "You're defending her! You have to get it into your head—she's dangerous! Don't believe her. She's a witch; she twists everything, turns black into white. I know her! I forbid you to see her."

Viktoria felt herself turning red in the face. She opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted again. "Yes, yes, I know what you're going to say, but there's no point in talking to her. Go and see the police if you want to help, or go to the mental hospital in town! She's mad, she needs taking in hand!"

One of the dogs started barking.

"Miss O'Sullivan," said Viktoria very deliberately, "perhaps we should return to the subject another time. You must excuse me. I have an important letter to write."

That was unfriendly, she thought. I let myself take offense, which wasn't necessary. But who is this Josephine, hardly even middle aged, to jump all over me like this, forbidding me to do what I think is right! Nonsense. I have every right to be angry. I need to remember—there's not as much difference as people think between the young and the old. One of them's excluded, one of them's trying to remain included, none of it's going well. Mad, she says. Mad—needs taking in hand. There is more than one way of taking someone in hand.

Dear Hilda,

Here in your beautiful home, so many memories come back to me from our travels in Scotland and Ireland so long ago. Do you remember the time we picked spring flowers somewhere near Galway and put them in a jam jar on the window ledge? The other day I found the first spring flowers by the roadside but they didn't like . . .

No. No good. Too sentimental. How ill is she really?

Dear Hilda,
It's so peaceful and pleasant here . . .

But now Hilda was going hazy again.

We could have talked to each other more. Those trips weren't any fun at all, but we could have discussed it and tried to figure out why things went wrong—was she inhibiting my freedom, my happy curiosity, or was it me who frightened her into helpless whining? Very interesting, actually.

Maybe I'll write to her a little later.

Viktoria went and knocked on X's door with no idea what she wanted to say. X let her in, silently, her face totally closed.

"Good afternoon," said Viktoria. "I had no real reason for coming. I just wanted to come."

"Ah, paying a call," said X. "A social call, if I understand you correctly. Have you joined their colony?"

"No. I think it suits me better to stay on the outside."

"Sit down. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you, not today. Nothing."

After a long silence, X said, "And no conversation? Not a word? No crumb of comfort for the recluse?"

"That word doesn't suit you," Viktoria said. "But you have every right to your solitude. Anyway, solitary people interest me. There are so many different ways of being solitary."

"I know just what you mean," said X. "I know exactly what you're going to say. Different kinds of solitude. Enforced solitude and voluntary solitude."

"Quite," said Viktoria. "There's no need to go into it further. But when people understand each other without speaking, it can often leave them with very little to talk about, don't you think? I've had that experience, not often but once or twice. It felt good, a pleasant sort of silence."

Her hostess lit a table lamp. What am I doing, thought Viktoria. Am I being disloyal to Josephine? But all I want is to take this thing further, to explore, to understand in order to help.

"Tell me something," said X. "Are you a curious person?"

"Yes, you might say that. Or, rather, I'm interested."

"In me?"

“Certainly. In everything.”

“Do you get the impression that I’m dangerous?”

“No, not really.” Viktoria paused for a moment, then said, perhaps rashly, “Someone once gave me a pressure cooker. For making porridge, that sort of thing. It was dangerous and exploded. The inside pressure was apparently too great.”

“Very likely,” said X. “All that proves is that you shouldn’t mess with appliances unless you know how they’re made. What did you do with it?”

“What could I do? It was broken. Such a pity, such a fine appliance.”

“There she goes again,” said X. “Opera. That’s all she has. I detest opera.”

The music from next door was amazingly clear.

“Do you like opera?”

“Not particularly,” said Viktoria. “What I like best is New Orleans, and classic jazz. When I retired, my students gave me a stereo. I take good care of it.” Viktoria took out her cigarettes and looked enquiringly at X.

“Feel free,” said her hostess, a little impatiently. Then there was silence.

At last X spoke again. “Do you even know why you came to see me?”

Viktoria didn’t answer.

“You seem to be an honest sort of person. You’re naturally open. But you’ve come to the wrong place; you need to be careful. This is a dangerous place for people like you.”

“What you mean is,” said Viktoria carefully, “that perhaps I’m too suggestible?”

“More or less.”

“And that I might find it hard to take a stand and be decisive?”

“You’re very wise,” said X.

Viktoria sighed, stubbed out her cigarette, and got to her feet.

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “It’s a terrible climb up the hill to your house. But it’s always easy to get down again.”

By now it was dusk. Viktoria walked over to the low wall at the edge of the village’s final ridge. There they were again, those lovely columns of blue smoke rising in the shadow of the mountain straight up into the windless evening air. They must be burning leaves and dry branches, the way they did at home in

spring.

Yes, I have to be careful, I have to know what I want and who I'm trying to protect. She was quite right. I'll go home now and teach myself some Spanish. How do you say: "Excuse me, is there anyone who can help me with my laundry?"

One evening Viktoria set off in a new direction, following her nose. The lane turned into a path that gradually disappeared into a stony landscape full of olive trees that seemed tremendously old. Dead branches still hung on the trees. Under the olives a flock of sheep were grazing—parallel dirty-yellow backs, bowed heads, the submissive posture of victims. She caught her foot in a plastic bag and saw she was in a kind of trash dump, the unavoidable outskirts of any human paradise. She felt irrationally depressed.

At that exact moment the setting sun broke through a gap in the mountain chain and the twilit landscape was instantly transformed and revealed; the trees and the grazing sheep enveloped in a crimson haze, a sudden, beautiful vision of biblical mystery and power. Viktoria thought she had never seen anything so lovely. She remembered once a set designer saying, "My job is to paint with light, that's all it is. The right light at the right time." The sun moved quickly on, but before the colors could fade, Viktoria turned and walked slowly back to her house.

Dear Hilda,

I just want to say hello because I feel so happy this evening. Your Spanish landscape is so much more than I ever expected or dreamed of, and I dream more often and more powerfully than anyone knows. Couldn't we spend a little time here together when you're well again?

I'm not sure we handled our trips together the way we might have, and I think it was mostly my fault. Trying to do and see everything, rushing here and there the way I did. I know better now.

You know it's possible just to be in a place, to look around until you actually see, differently, and then to talk about it, talk about anything at all and feel our way forward together. The young are always in too much of a hurry, don't you think?

Promise me we'll try again. Please?

On Sunday morning Viktoria woke up to bells—the distant admonishment of church bells. Maybe that's a good idea, she thought. For once. But just as she was putting on her shoes, she caught sight of her hiking boots standing in a corner, and she thought some more. Such a beautiful morning. And it had really been unenterprising of her not to have discovered where the main road led, the big main road below the village. Church could wait for a cloudy day. So she pulled on her boots and packed a bag with a bottle of fruit juice, cigarettes, and her *Guide for Tourists: Useful Phrases*. If the expedition proved tiring it might be nice to lie on the grass in the shade of an orange tree and read.

The morning was still cool and beautiful. On either side of the road were big orchards, their branches bowed to the ground with oranges and lemons, perfect Gardens of Eden—except that they were surrounded by fences. Inside, no one moved among the trees, where the grass grew tall and utterly untouched. When she came to a gate, it was locked. Viktoria thought that with a little effort she could probably slip quickly through the fence and creep under the branches as if into a green grotto and lie there hidden from the world, picking an orange now and then—and, of course, putting the peel in her pocket . . .

A woman was walking toward her from the village, a woman in black. It was X.

"Good morning!" called Viktoria. "Are you on your way into town? May I walk with you?"

X stopped for a moment. "No," she answered. "Not today."

"I've been doing a lot of thinking," Viktoria began, but X turned away and walked on down the valley. It was as if a black raven had sailed by in the sunshine. Viktoria was hurt; after all, they had had a very personal conversation in which X had definitely come out on top. She could have been a little more pleasant.

Women, thought Viktoria, difficult at school from the very first class. Boys were easier; you knew where you stood with them. She sat down by the roadside, took out her bottle of juice and her *Guide for Tourists*, and started thinking about the road home, all uphill. It was getting too hot again now. It was always either icy cold or too hot.

A car came driving down from the village and stopped and hooted; a door slammed open and out came Josephine with her dogs. She staggered and sat down laughing in the road. “Mrs. Viktoria!” shouted someone from inside the car. “Come with us to the fiesta! Carnival! Hurry up, they may have started already!” Josephine’s face looked even smaller framed between two plaits of her astonishingly red hair. She had a ribbon over her head and glass beads around her neck and, as far as Viktoria could judge, was meant to look like a Red Indian. There was a knife in her belt. She shouted, “You’re my prisoner, Professor!”

Viktoria stood up and asked if it was a real carnival.

“The biggest one all year,” Josephine assured her. “Everyone does just what they want, and to hell with everybody else, just footloose and fancy-free! Hurry up; we haven’t got all day! We stopped at your place but you weren’t there. This is Mabel and Ellen and Jackie. Here, have a tipple of this! We’re going to a party!”

It was whiskey again. They drove down the hill at a dizzying speed. One of Josephine’s friends had started singing. Viktoria looked out anxiously for X; it wouldn’t do at all for X to see her with Josephine, in the bosom of the colony, deserting to the enemy camp. She crouched down and tried to make herself invisible, thinking bitterly, What do I mean, deserting? Which way? If Josephine had seen me walking down the road with X, what would she have thought? And anyway, does it really matter what they think?

Down in the town they were met by music.

“Another small drop, Viktoria,” said one of the colonists.

“No, thanks. Maybe not right now.”

They left the car and made their way slowly through the crowds in the narrow streets. Josephine clung to Viktoria’s arm, shouting cheerfully, “Make way! Make way! I’ve captured a real professor!”

It was extremely embarrassing.

Balloons everywhere, shouts and laughter. Small children riding through the crowds on their fathers’ shoulders, a howling cherub in a bright yellow wig, a miniature devil with horns, a Zorro, clouds of confetti rising from the square ahead.

“Please, Miss O’Sullivan,” Viktoria pleaded, “let go. I really don’t need to go any closer.” But she was pushed on relentlessly,

tightly hemmed in by a strange procession of color and movement under a rain of flowers and sprigs of olive. Many of the dancers were wearing masks, violent faces of mockery, ecstasy, unbearable pain. To Viktoria their gestures seemed out of control, their colors chosen to hurt the eye—and now they were approached by tight, silent rows of children in costume. Viktoria's eyes fastened on a solemn little girl and with a thrill of recognition she told herself, Yes, that's the Infanta of Velázquez. So beautiful. The Inquisition marched by, followed by the Most Beautiful of All under an arch of mimosa and almond blossom. Viktoria thought she looked frightened. Then came the cobwebbed figures of the Dead Forest, followed by several marching whiskey bottles. Viktoria turned to smile at Josephine, but Josephine had vanished.

I must try and describe all this to Hilda. I'll write this very evening; it'll cheer her up. Just look, all these people getting to live out their dreams, play a part, finally become someone else. It's wonderful. Why don't we have carnivals at home—my goodness, we certainly need them. Here's a woman whose dream was to be a brave and gallant Robin Hood: Look at the long feather in her hat! And those excited men dancing their dream of being women, with their glorious bosoms!

The music grew wilder. She saw a toreador and his bull playing a passionate game with each other. People shouted and pressed forward. It was a splendid fiesta!

A black sedan full of bandits rolled into the square. And in front of it, on an empty patch of naked street, there was X—dancing, as dark as the car, slashing the air around her with a long, gleaming knife. A kitchen knife, in fact. The music had changed to España Cañi. Then Viktoria saw Josephine rush out into the street—Josephine, also with a knife in her hand. "Josephine!" she cried. "Stop! Come back!"

The two women circled each other in front of the bandits' car. They lunged, retreated, and the crowd cried bravo and clapped hands in time with the music. Viktoria shouted again, "Stop! *Pericoloso*! Dangerous!" But no one paid her any attention. The two women had begun to stamp on the ground, approaching each other, circling close and dancing away again. Their dance had now captured the crowd's complete attention. Josephine was having difficulty staying on her feet. Someone behind Viktoria

said they weren't doing the right steps and weren't really Spanish at all. Viktoria turned around and hissed, "Shut up, you idiot! You don't understand what's going on! This is a matter of life and death."

The procession moved slowly on and Viktoria followed, pushing forward, unapologetically. She saw Josephine stagger and drop her knife. X picked it up and gave it back to her, and they continued circling each other like cats in a backyard. Josephine's dogs ran back and forth as close to X as they dared and yapping as if possessed. And the music played on. But now the procession had slowed and stopped. Josephine staggered against the radiator of the bandits' car and clung to it with both hands. X advanced on her slowly and Viktoria shrieked, "No!" X raised her knife and quickly, with a couple of slashes, she sliced off Josephine's red braids, threw them contemptuously on the street and walked away.

The crowd drew back to let her pass; it had all happened very quickly. The music switched to "Never on Sunday" and Viktoria was suddenly trapped in the tightly packed crowd and wanted only to go home. Eventually she managed to escape from the square to some deserted streets and sat down outside a café to rest her legs. A man came up and said, "Sorry to bother you. I'm American. You called me an idiot."

"And so you were," said Viktoria wearily. "When someone is stamping her feet, it doesn't make any difference whether or it's 'Spanish' or not. People stamp their feet because they're angry. Where do you think I could find a taxi?"

"My car's just around the corner," the man said. "I'm from Houston, Texas."

All the way up to the village he told her about his family and his job. They exchanged addresses and promised to send postcards.

Stretched on her bed in the cool darkness Viktoria tried to make sense of what had happened. The vendetta had clearly reached a dramatic climax. And now, thought Viktoria, Josephine will just have to find a new way to do her hair—and X will be even more unpopular and isolated. She's the loser, she behaved badly. I must try to be fair. It's natural to root for the underdog, but what does sympathy have to do with justice? Josephine was the one I promised to help. But X interests me

more—I'm not objective.

It was the same way with my students—it mattered so much to them which side I was on. They would drive me to despair by seeing everything in black and white. Is there such a thing as a real absolute, a true either/or? Or is everyone somehow right in their own way, and because I understand that, it makes me indecisive and wishy-washy, trying to tolerate each point of view? But those parties I used to give for my students were an attempt, perhaps an awkward one, or too timid, but an attempt nonetheless, to get them out of their tight little cliques and be friendly and civilized and listen and understand each other a little better. My parties were a good idea. I think I should try it again. A party for the whole colony? No. Just for Josephine and X.

The telegram came later that evening. 'Mom died this morning just fell asleep but it seems strange dont worry tell Jose if roof leaks dont worry Elisabeth."

At first Viktoria felt she ought to go home and help. But maybe not. She sat at the table and read the telegram over and over. What was that about the roof? Why should it start to leak? How peculiar. After a while, she went up onto the terrace and emptied a couple of pailfuls of water on the roof. None of the water came through.

And then suddenly, with surprising intensity, Viktoria found herself grieving for the lost friend of her youth—Hilda, who never understood how easily she could have stopped being difficult.

I'll throw out that horrible squid! And take in the saucer I put out for the cats. They don't drink milk, these Spanish cats—not even the cats here are normal.

That evening Viktoria went to the café and ordered a Cuba Libre. She asked José what the wild cats drank when they were thirsty.

José laughed. "They lick up the dew."

That night Viktoria lulled herself to sleep by imagining she was an independent Spanish cat finding an opportune dew cup at dawn (if dew cups even grew in this country).

Viktoria wrote out invitations to her party, taking a lot of trouble with the formal wording and calligraphy. The supper would take place at José's, the only restaurant in the village. It

was behind his café, a terrace with a magnificent view over the valley, perfect for summer tourists passing through.

This will do nicely, Viktoria thought, and went to discuss her plans with José. There were a lot of people in the café. She greeted José and Catalina and invited them to take a glass with her because she needed advice on an important personal matter. Catalina smiled and said no, thank you, she was too busy, but José carried two Cuba Libres to a table by the glass doors to the terrace. Viktoria came straight to the point. "I'm planning a formal supper with two guests and I want it to be a really good one. I have confidence in your culinary experience and I'd like to discuss the menu. Isn't lamb the right choice for the main dish?"

"Definitely," said José, enthusiastically. "I suggest *cordero con guisantes*."

"That sounds excellent," said Viktoria, nodding thoughtfully as if she were an expert. "And as a starter—I mean *entremeses*?"

"How about *gambas fritas*?"

Viktoria knew *gambas* were prawns. She made a dismissive gesture; people always had prawns at formal dinners back home. "Perhaps something more—exotic?"

"*Erizos naturales*?"

"Well, it depends," said Viktoria cryptically, not wanting to ask for a translation. "But we must have mimosa on the table, masses of it. Not almond blossoms, we have to think about the poor almonds. And the wine?"

"Privilegio del Rey," José answered firmly. "Privilegio del Rey without a doubt. Would you like to taste it, Professor? It's very renowned."

"With pleasure."

José fetched two large glasses and Viktoria tasted the wine. She nodded graciously and asked about the vintage. They continued their earnest discussion. The villagers followed the conversation carefully; they could tell it was very important.

José asked, "Which would you prefer, Professor, *ensalada verde mezclada* or *chalotas y remolachas*?"

"*Ensalada verde* of course."

"Of course," agreed José appreciatively.

"And cheese," said Viktoria.

"Just cheese? No dessert?"

"I think just cheese is more elegant. And then coffee."

José lifted his hands. “My dear Professor, that’s impossible, unthinkable! You can’t have a real supper without *postre*! *Crema de Café Dolores yanes, pastel infanta, platanos a la Canaria, amor frío—*”

“Is it so very important?” asked Viktoria in astonishment. “What was that last one called?”

“*Amor frío*.”

“Doesn’t that mean more or less ‘cold love’?”

“More or less.”

“Then it couldn’t be better,” said Viktoria, and giggled. “Only one other important detail: There have to be oranges on the table, a large bowl. Complete with leaves.” She could see that José didn’t like the idea; he looked suddenly crestfallen. Then she took out her invitation cards and asked if he’d be so kind as to arrange for them to be delivered; it would be more polite than sending them by post.

Their conference was over.

The next day word went round that the unsociable professor was giving a dinner in style at José’s. The detail about the oranges was considered highly amusing. And the combination of guests was a topic of general discussion. So far as anyone knew, neither woman had declined the invitation. Everyone could see that this completely altered the picture, which must now be judged from an entirely new angle, depending, of course, on the outcome of Viktoria’s dinner.

The crucial evening itself was mild and beautiful. Viktoria dressed with particular care; the pearls were for her guests but the chinchilla was to impress the colony. The café was full of villagers but there was no one on the terrace. The colony was anxious not to appear inquisitive.

The guests arrived on time from different directions, Josephine without her dogs. Viktoria rose to welcome them. José appeared in a white apron and served Privilegio del Rey.

“So good of you to come,” Viktoria said. “I’d like to drink to your health because, among other things, I believe you to be two very enterprising and courageous women. We’ll raise our glasses to the spring, to new beginnings.”

Josephine had been to a hair salon in town and was now crowned with an astoundingly large bush of red hair.

“How kind,” she said. “How very kind.”

Viktoria's guests were extremely wary; they looked as if they had come to take an examination.

Viktoria made a sweeping gesture encompassing the magnificent landscape, the mountains, and the flowering valley and said, "You know, in the days when I had students, so many of them longed to travel, maybe to places like this, sometime in the future when they'd be able to afford it. We often spread out a map of the world and talked about where we would most like to go. It was such fun." Viktoria turned to X and asked her how she had come to choose this particular village.

X shrugged and said, "For a long time I cared for an elderly relative. When she died I inherited her house."

"Do you ever feel homesick?"

"No. But I do sometimes think about lawns."

"Of course, lawns!" Viktoria energetically agreed. "And meadows. Here you can't get onto the grass; it's reserved for the orange trees. Of course, you could go into the mountains—there are no fences up there."

"It's nothing but stones," said Josephine. "I tried." She broke off as José came out on the terrace to serve them. When he'd gone, she repeated herself impatiently. "Nothing but stones. And it's so dark indoors. Always dark."

"Yes," said Viktoria. "But all you have to do is go outside. Am I right?"

Her guests didn't answer. There was a long silence. X was eating but Josephine merely toyed with her food.

Viktoria tried again. She told some amusing stories about her students, about her own impracticality, how they'd always lent a hand, the same way Josephine had helped her build a fire or the way Miss Smith had let her rest that time she was tired and feeling ill.

"You weren't feeling ill," X interrupted calmly and confidently. "You were perfectly fine. You were out sniffing around on her behalf."

"Quite true, Miss Smith," Viktoria answered lightly. "I behaved badly. But in all honesty, do you think it's proper to go around threatening to kill people and making faces at their cleaning lady?"

Josephine laughed and finally began to eat her food.

"As for you, Josephine O'Sullivan," continued Viktoria,

determined to be fair, “is opera really the only music you’ve got?”

“No,” said Josephine angrily.

José was there again, fussing about and asking if everything was satisfactory. “Thank you, absolutely perfect,” Viktoria said. “Could we have another bottle of your excellent wine?” He bowed and went away. The wine came.

Viktoria looked out across the valley and said, “How quiet it is.”

“Quiet,” X remarked. “You’ve a weakness for quiet, haven’t you? And there’s no real need to talk if people are comfortable with not expressing every little thought. Wasn’t that how you put it?”

Viktoria went red. “Any statement can lose its meaning if it’s repeated in a distorted form,” she said stiffly.

Josephine gave Viktoria a meaningful look, smiled sourly, and shrugged.

The meal continued.

The oranges were beautifully arranged, each fruit still with its own green leaves. Viktoria picked one up and remarked that José had really done his best with them.

“An affectation,” said X. “Does he think we’re tourists? Nobody here eats oranges.”

Viktoria said, “It was my idea, not José’s. Think of the oranges as a decoration, a sort of symbol.”

“Of what?”

“A dream perhaps, a symbol of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Something unattainable. I absolutely believe in oranges.”

“I so understand,” Josephine exclaimed. “There’s nothing wrong with having oranges on the table! In Russia they had apples. I know what Viktoria means. She’s unusual.”

“To put it mildly,” said X very drily.

On the main road below the terrace, several small boys stopped and started pointing, shouting something in Spanish again and again.

“What do they want?” Viktoria said.

X looked at Josephine and explained carefully. “They’re saying there’s that woman who made a scene at the carnival, the one by the bandits’ car.”

“They don’t mean me, they mean her!” Josephine shouted. “She was the one who went wild! Viktoria, you saw what happened!”

Viktoria had a sudden impulse to scold them. Girls, girls! she wanted to say, but she held her tongue. José came out and chased away the youngsters with a flood of animated Spanish.

The sun had dropped behind the mountains, and the evening chill set in as soon as it was gone. Viktoria was suddenly angry. “Ladies,” she said, “for me the carnival was unbelievable. And I understand how the excitement could make anyone lose their head and go a bit wild. Believe me, I’ve lost control of myself more times than I like to remember. But afterwards I try to forget and hope others can do the same.” She signaled to José to bring another bottle. “This is a very good wine. It should be drunk in a calm and thoughtful atmosphere. Ladies, what shall we drink to?”

“To you,” Josephine burst out. “To justice! The justice that always wins out over foul play!” She had already had a few drinks before leaving home, just to be on the safe side.

“And how do you like her new hairdo?” said X, not touching her wine.

Viktoria corrected her. “How do I like Josephine’s new hairdo? I think it makes her look younger.”

She was rather tired now and decided to turn the party over to her guests. She excused herself and took refuge in the ladies’ room. The view from that window was no less beautiful, but she hardly noticed. It was a bit cruel to leave the two of them together, she thought. I could have stayed. Now they’re sitting there in silence. I’ve failed. I should have learned by now to let people sort out their own problems. I’m like some kind of sheepdog, running myself ragged to round everyone up and get them organized. The thought amused her. She decided to order some cognac with the coffee.

As she was going back through the café, José came up to her conspiratorially and whispered, “How’s it going?”

“It’s going fine, I think,” Viktoria said. “It’s working out. The food, the wine, the decoration—everything was perfect. I think we’ll have some cognac with our coffee.”

Her guests were sitting bolt upright. They had clearly been having a discussion.

“Dear Viktoria,” said Josephine, breathless with excitement. “We’ve been thinking—”

“Thank her first,” X broke in.

“Yes, of course. We’d like to thank you for your extraordinary kindness and generosity. A wonderful meal, so well thought out in every detail.”

“Not so fast,” said X. “Get a grip on yourself. Quite simply, Viktoria, you’ve given us a chance. But don’t you think Josephine and I could just go on disliking each other?”

“It’s possible,” answered Viktoria. “Indeed, why not? But here’s the cognac. What shall we drink to this time?”

“Nothing,” said Josephine. “I’ve been talking too much. I really ought to go home. The dogs have been alone all evening.”

“Their legs are too short,” said X.

Viktoria raised her cognac and said, “Ladies, you waste your time on inessentials. When we’ve finished our coffee, I think we should devote ourselves to the contemplation of nightfall.”

They walked through the café, where all conversation stopped, and came out onto the square.

“It’s cold,” said Josephine, trying to fasten Viktoria’s chinchilla for her.

“Leave it alone,” said X. “Viktoria knows whether she’s cold or not. Stop fussing.”

“You always know better than anyone else!” Josephine snapped. “But you don’t know a thing about Viktoria, not a thing!” And she walked on ahead up the lane.

“Take no notice,” said Viktoria. “She’ll see things more clearly in the morning.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. Everything can change.” Viktoria did not explain in more detail that for her every new morning was a kind of happy challenge, just as it was with new opportunities, surprises, maybe even insights, yes, and plain excitement. In fact she’d done more than enough pontificating for one evening, and now she simply mentioned that José had promised to bring some firewood after nine. So she would sweep the patio and ask him to pile the wood in a different corner so it wouldn’t disturb the bougainvillea.

X smiled. “Inessentials, my dear Viktoria. You mentioned inessentials, I think? All those tiny tasks and worries. Every new day filled with one thing or another. Look at Josephine up there.

She spends half her day walking her dogs and playing her operas and the other half running to meaningless parties, and it's hard work being insulted, making yourself popular, clinging hard to what little pride you've got . . . And you, a real Viktoria, you condescend to display a well-meaning tolerance. Oh yes, I saw you in that car! Wait, don't say anything. I know for someone like you it's hard to say no, but you have no real principles, not guiding ones that run consistently through everything you do. None of you have. You water down your drinks and your feelings. Do you understand what I'm saying? No single, firm, undiluted beliefs.

Walking on, they caught up with Josephine, who was sitting on the long flight of steps leading up to her house.

Viktoria said to X, "There are beliefs and beliefs. Hating the colony is not a particularly interesting one, and besides it's pretty diluted too by now, don't you think? You should find yourself a new one, a more useful one if you can. Or just forget it, of course."

"What do you mean, forget it?"

"Well, you could accept the fact that you're ordinary. I always find that quite exciting enough."

"Ha, ha, there you are," said Josephine. "Totally ordinary—like Viktoria. That's rare."

X helped Josephine to her feet and said, "Yes, yes, come on, let's go. Good night, Viktoria."

"Good night." For a moment Viktoria stood watching them climb the long, laborious flight of steps.

Many other people had been watching, too.

The next week X was invited to the Wainwrights'. And later even to Lady Oldfield's, though she wasn't accepted into the Inner Circle until the colony had assured itself that Miss Smith had interesting eccentricities that could contribute pleasantly to enlivening its social life. But that didn't happen till the autumn.

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

SHOPPING

IT WAS five in the morning and still overcast. The dreadful stink seemed to be getting worse. As usual, Emily walked down Robert Street as far as Blom's grocery store. The shards of glass squeaked under her shoes and she decided that one day she'd have to make the place a little more approachable. So long as it didn't interfere with her constant shopping. They had plenty of canned food in the kitchen at the moment, but you could never be sure these days, Emily thought. Surprisingly, the big mirror was still there outside Blom's, and Emily stopped for a moment to tidy her hair. Really no one could call her fat now; plump might be more accurate—or Junoesque, as Kris liked to say. In fact her coat fit a good deal better now; it was green and matched her shopping bags. She climbed a pile of rubble to get in through the window. Here it was rotting food that was smelling bad.

She noticed at once that they had been there again, because now the shelves were almost empty. They hadn't bothered with the sauerkraut; she stowed away what was left of that and helped herself to the last packet of candles and, while she was about it, a new scrub brush and some shampoo. There was no more fruit juice, so Kris would just have to make do with river water, like it or lump it. She could go on to Lundgren's and have a look there, but that was quite a long way off. Another time. Wanting to make the most of her morning, Emily went into number six, left her bags near the entrance, and walked up one floor to the Erikssons' flat. That was as far as you could go.

Luckily the Erikssons had not closed their door when they left. Emily knew there was nothing important left to take; she had shopped for all she wanted from there a long time ago, but it was nice to sit on the fine living-room sofa and rest her legs. Although of course it was no longer so fine anymore, since others had stained it and cut it with knives. But Emily had got there first. And she'd had such great respect for the beauty of the peaceful room that she had taken nothing from it but food. Later, when everything had been trashed and soiled, she saved a few

more things to brighten up the kitchen at home and to surprise Kris. This time she helped herself to the rococo wall clock which had stopped at five, her shopping hour. No one else was out at five in the morning; it was a good safe time.

She started for home. She wondered whether Kris could eat sauerkraut, especially now his stomach was delicate. About halfway home she put down her bags, which were very heavy, and looked out over the changed landscape, the shrunken suburb where she lived. There certainly wasn't much left; on the other side of the river, nothing at all. Strange the trees hadn't yet burst into leaf in the park.

And then she caught sight of them, right at the far end of Robert Street, only two specks but moving, quite clearly moving. They were coming. She began to run.

The kitchen she shared with Kris was on the ground floor. They had always eaten at the kitchen table and had been about to have dinner when it happened. The rest of the floor was totally blocked. Kris had pointlessly injured his leg. In Emily's opinion he should never have rushed out, ending up with half the façade on top of him. It was nothing but idle male curiosity. He knew perfectly well what you were supposed to do. There had been warnings on the radio: "Stay indoors in the event of . . ." and so on. And now here he was lying on a mattress Emily had found in the street.

She had hung the rug up to cover the hole where the window had blown out, and later fixed the whole thing in place by nailing up boards from rubbish she found outside. Luckily the toolbox had been in the kitchen. Otherwise, absolutely anyone could have climbed in through the window. To be really safe she spent hours piling up camouflage on the outside as well. As Kristian lay on his mattress listening to Emily constructing their defenses, he couldn't help feeling that she was enjoying herself—at least up to a point. He took care not to alarm her. He spent a lot of time sleeping. This business of his leg didn't seem too serious but it did hurt and he couldn't rest his weight on it. The darkness distressed him more.

Now he was awake and groping for the candle and matches on the floor by the mattress. He lit the candle carefully so the match wouldn't go out. He had the books from the Erikssons' place, unread books from a world that had no meaning for him

anymore. He wound up his watch, as he did every morning. It was a little after six; she'd be home any minute. There weren't many matches left.

I wish we could talk about what's happened, thought Kristian; give it a name, have a serious matter-of-fact conversation. But I haven't the heart to. And I don't want to frighten her. If only we could have that damn window open.

Here she was. She unlocked the kitchen door, put her bags on the table, smiled at him, and showed him the Erikssons' gilded clock, a monstrous object. "How's the leg? Had a good sleep?"

"Excellent," said Kristian. "Did you find any matches?"

"No. And there wasn't any more fruit juice. They've slashed the sofa at the Erikssons'."

"You're out of breath," said Kristian. "You've been running. Did you see them?"

Emily took off her coat and hung the new scrub brush on the peg where the old one had been. "I must get some more water from the river so I can wash up," she said.

"Emily? Did you see them?"

"Yes. Only two of them. A long way off. Somewhere near Edlund's corner. Maybe people are moving to the center now the shops are empty."

"Edlund's corner? But I thought you said it wasn't there any more? That there's nothing left beyond the petrol station?"

"Yes, yes, but the corner itself is still there." Emily put a plate with tomato juice and crispbread down beside him on the floor. "Try and eat something. You're getting much too thin." She took down the household book and entered the new cans of sauerkraut on the Vegetables page.

Very soon Kristian started talking about the window. They had to open it, free it up and let in the daylight again. He couldn't stand this darkness any longer.

"But they'll get in!" Emily exclaimed. "They'll find us in no time and take all the food I've been shopping for! Kris, please do try to understand. You have no idea what I've seen! The Erikssons' sofa . . . tons of smashed china, antiques as well . . . And anyway, it's so dark outside."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it just keeps getting darker. Two weeks ago I could go shopping at four and now it's hard to see anything before five."

Kristian was very disturbed. “Are you sure? That it’s getting darker? But it’s the beginning of June—it can’t be getting darker!”

“Kris, love. Calm down. It’s just that it’s always overcast. We haven’t seen the sun since . . . I mean, not even once.”

He sat up and took hold of her arm. “D’you mean like twilight or . . . ?”

“No—I just mean it’s overcast! Clouds, you know? Clouds! Why are you trying to upset me?”

Far off in the city the siren started up again. It sounded intermittently, with long intervals, a sort of helpless lament that made Emily frantic. Kristian had tried to reassure her by saying maybe they had a generator at the fire station that had somehow got stuck, but it was no use. She’d just wept, like she was doing now. Then she sprang up and began blindly rearranging her cans and jars on the kitchen shelf. One fell to the floor, rolled across and knocked over the candle, putting it out.

“Look what you’ve done,” he said. “How many matches do you think we have left! What do you think we’ll do when they’re all gone—sit here in the dark and wait for the end? We’ve got to have that window open!”

“You and your window!” shouted Emily. “Why can’t you just let me be happy? You know you like it when I’m happy! And we’ve got it nice here at home, haven’t we? I found a bar of soap yesterday, you hear—a bar of soap!” Suddenly calm, she went on. “I’m making our home cozy and snug. I go out and shop. I find amazing things . . . Why do you have to scare me? Why do you have to make everything so dismal?”

“How do you think it feels?” said Kristian, “How do you think it feels lying here like a corpse unable to help you or look after you! It feels like shit.”

“You’re proud, aren’t you?” Emily said. “Has it never occurred to you that I’ve never in all my life had a chance to protect anyone else and make decisions and take responsibility for important things? Let me keep that. Don’t take it away from me! All you have to do to help is keep me from being afraid.” She found the matches and lit the candle. “The only thing that worries me is that they might come and take our food. Nothing else.”

One day Kristian forgot to wind up his watch. At first he

couldn't admit it, not right away, not till evening. Emily was standing at the sink; she stiffened but said nothing.

"I know," said Kristian. "It's unforgivable. My only duty and I've failed. Emily? Speak to me."

"They've all stopped," said Emily in a very low voice. "All the clocks have stopped. Now I'll never again know when it's time to go shopping."

He insisted, "It was unforgivable of me."

They said no more about it. But this business of the watch changed something; it established uncertainty, a reticence between them. Emily went out less often with her bags; the food shops were empty and going to the Erikssons' only made her sad. However, the last time she went there, she took the large Spanish silk shawl lying over the piano, thinking it might add a little color to their barricaded window. On the way home she saw a dog. She tried to get it to come to her but it ran away.

When she came into the kitchen, she said, "I saw a dog."

Kristian was immediately interested. "Where? What did it look like?"

"A brown-and-white setter. Near the park. I called but it got scared and ran away. The rats aren't scared."

"Which way did it run?"

"Oh, it just ran off. Funny no one's eaten it yet. And what the poor dog must have been living on doesn't bear thinking about. In any case, it wasn't particularly thin."

Kristian lay down again. "Sometimes you astonish me," he said. "Women astonish me."

Their life went on unchanged. Kristian's leg got a little better, and now and then he managed to sit at the kitchen table. He'd sit there sorting the matches into piles and doing calculations: so many matches would last them such and such a length of time. Every time Emily came back from fetching water he would ask her if she had seen them. Then one morning she did see them.

"Were they men or women?"

"I don't know. They were a long way off in the park."

"Couldn't you see whether they were young or old?"

"No."

"I wonder," said Kristian, "I wonder if they've noticed too how it's getting darker all the time. I wonder what they think about.

Do they try and talk things over and make plans, or are they just scared. Why haven't they gone away like all the others? And do they think they're entirely alone, that there isn't anyone else left, not a single—"

"Kris love, I don't know. I try not to think about them."

"But we have to think about them!" Kristian burst out. "Perhaps that's all there is, us and them. We could meet them."

"You can't mean that."

"On the contrary, I'm serious. We could talk to them. Figure out what we could do together. Share things."

"Not our food!" Emily shouted.

"Keep your cans and jars," said Kristian contemptuously. "We could share what's happened, the things you never want to talk about. What's happened, why it happened, and where we can go from here if there *is* any going on."

"I have to take the rubbish out," said Emily.

"You don't have to do any such thing. You need to listen to what I have to say. It's important." And Kristian went on talking, trying to communicate to her the conviction that had formed in him during all those days and weeks of being imprisoned in darkness. He offered Emily his respect for her judgment in exchange for the trust and loyalty he felt she owed him as his woman. In fact he was making her a declaration of love, but she didn't understand that, and left the room without a word so she wouldn't have to listen.

When she had gone Kristian was gripped by a terrible rage. He made his way to the window and tore down the Spanish shawl. Then he pried loose the boards one after another, attacking the window with a hatred born of disappointment till his leg gave way and he sank to his knees. But through a little opening at one side, daylight came into the room.

Emily had come back. She stood in the doorway and shouted, "You've torn my Spanish shawl!"

"Yes, I've torn your shawl. The world is coming to an end and little Emily's shawl is torn. What a shame! Give me the ax—now!"

Kristian threw himself at the barricade. Time and again he collapsed and had to lower the ax—and then he'd try again.

"Let me," whispered Emily.

"No. This has nothing to do with you."

But she moved forward to support him so he could continue. When the window was opened, she began sweeping up the mess he'd made. Kristian waited for her to speak but she said nothing. In the gray light from outside, their kitchen seemed unfamiliar, exposed, a room full of random shabbiness and unnecessary things.

Then Emily said, "They're coming," and without looking at him went on. "You seem to be doing pretty well on your leg. You're so difficult these days I can't cope with you. Come on, let's go out." She opened the kitchen door.

"But do you have confidence in me?" asked Kristian. "Do you believe in me?"

"Don't be so pompous—of course I do. But take your coat; it's getting colder." She helped him on with his coat and took his arm.

Outside it was already getting darker as evening came on. The others had come nearer. Very slowly, Kristian and Emily walked towards them.

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

THE GULLS

NOW HE had ripped all the luggage open again, for the third time.

"But Arne, darling," said Elsa. "We'll never get going if you don't start trusting the lists. We've been making them for weeks."

"I know, I know, stop going on about it. I just have to check one or two little things." His thin face was clenched with anxiety, and his hands had started shaking again.

He's going to get better.

"He's going to be fine," the doctor had said. "A month's peace and quiet is all he needs. He's overworked; it's the school's fault."

"What time is it, Elsa? Do you think it's too late to call the headmaster? Just to make sure he understands clearly, really clearly. I mean, so I can explain in detail."

"No. Don't phone again; it's not necessary. Don't even think about it."

But of course he does think about it, all the time. The school understood a long time ago that his resignation wasn't to be taken seriously. They understood that, and they want him back as soon as he's well again.

Arne turned to his wife with the weary intensity of repetition. "Bloody school. Bloody kids."

She said, "You ought to be working with much older students. They're too young, they don't know any better. You just have to understand—"

"Oh really? Understand them? All you need to understand is that they're hellish little wild beasts who will stop at nothing, nothing, I tell you, to destroy my work and make my life a living hell."

"Stop it, Arne! Calm down!"

"Right. Calm down. Wonderful. Nothing makes me feel less like calming down than someone telling me to calm down!"

Elsa started laughing. Her tension simply dissolved in a huge laugh, a laugh that suddenly made her beautiful.

"You idiot!" he shouted. "You stupid woman!" In a rage, he emptied his bag out onto the floor, turned his back on it, and

covered his face with his hands.

Elsa said very quietly, “I’m sorry. Come here.”

He went to where she was sitting and, with his head in her arms, he said, “Tell me again how it’s going to be.”

“We come closer and closer. Papa’s boat is small but very sturdy. We’re on our honeymoon. You’re sitting in the bow and you’ve never been in the islands before. With every new skerry, you think we’re there, but no, we’re going all the way out, right out to an island that’s hardly a shadow on the horizon. And when we land, it won’t be Papa’s island anymore, it’ll be ours, for weeks and weeks, and the city and everyone in it will fade away, till in the end they won’t even exist or have any hold on us at all. Just pure peace and quiet. And now in the spring the days and nights can be windless, soundless, somehow transparent . . . No boats will go by for days at a time.”

She stopped. He said, “And then?”

“We won’t need to work. No translating. No post, no telephone. No demands. We’ll hardly even open our books. We won’t fish or plant anything. We’ll just wait till we find something we want to do, and if we don’t find anything we want to do, well, that won’t matter, either.”

“But what if we do want to do something?”

He always asked that question and she always answered, “Then we’ll play. We’ll play at something totally silly.”

“Like what? What do you play on the island?”

She laughed and said, “With the birds.”

He sat up and looked at her.

“Yes, with the birds, the seabirds. I collect dry bread for them all winter. And when I come out in the spring, all I have to do is whistle and they know me. There are white wings everywhere; they take the bread right out of my hands in full flight! The loveliest game you can imagine.”

They both stood up. Elsa raised her arms to show how the big gull came to her, and then she told him how it felt when its wing softly brushed her cheek and when its cold, flat gull feet trustingly landed on her hand. She was no longer talking to him but to herself, talking about her own gull, the one who came back each spring and tapped at her window with its beak; the gull she called Casimir.

“What a name,” said Arne.

“Yes, isn’t it?” Elsa threw her arms around him and looked up into his face. “What do you think? Shall we go to bed?”

“Yes, but you know what a restless sleeper I am these days. I don’t want to keep you awake. Fruit juice or water?”

“Water,” said Elsa.

It was evening when they finally set out. A warm sunset still lingered over sea and sky. It was dead calm and indescribably beautiful. The large islands were soon behind them, and only very low skerries marked an invisible horizon. Arne was sitting in the bow. From time to time he’d turn and they’d smile at each other. She drew his attention to a long flight of migratory birds going past on their way north, and she pointed out several long-tailed ducks, their wings beating at lightning speed close above their reflections in the water. “The welcoming committee!” she shouted, but he couldn’t hear her over the motor.

When they arrived, a screaming cloud of hundreds of seabirds rose chalk-white against the evening sky. Arne stood looking up at the circling birds, the painter in his hand.

“They’ll settle down,” said Elsa. “But you see, they’re nesting right now. We just need to watch out for the nests right next to the cottage.”

They secured the boat and carried up their bags, and she gave him the key to unlock the house. Inside was a single low room with four windows. A damp chill had settled in it. All four windows looked out on a sea with no horizon.

“It’s totally unreal,” said Arne. “Like being on the top of a mountain or maybe up in a balloon. I think I can sleep tonight. Shall we leave the unpacking till morning? We don’t need lamps, do we? What about lighting a fire?”

“We don’t need anything,” said Elsa. “Everything’s fine.”

The birds started screeching before dawn, like a thousand furies spoiling for war. Their feet tramped over the sheet-metal roof as if laying siege to the cottage. They were everywhere.

Arne woke Elsa. “What’s the matter with them?” he said.

“They’re always like that in the morning,” she said. “One starts screeching and all the others start. They’ll soon quiet down. Let’s go back to sleep.” She took his hand in hers and fell asleep again

at once. The birds went on screeching. He tried to ignore it, but he could feel his old fear creeping closer, his horror of noise, of anything out of control. Then he found refuge in the memory of last night's proud fulfillment, in a renewed longing to shelter and protect, and so the clamor of the birds lost importance.

The sun rose, drowning the whole room in strong pink and orange light. Outside the cottage it was quiet.

I'll learn to be calm, he thought. I'll learn.

They drank their morning coffee.

Suddenly there was tapping at the window. Elsa leaped up and exclaimed, "It's Casimir! He's back!"

An enormous herring gull was pressed against the windowpane. It looked impatient.

"Is there any more coffee?" Arne said.

"I'll warm it up. Just a minute . . ." Elsa quickly put some dry bread to soak, cut a piece of cheese rind into convenient little bits, and carried it all out to the front steps. She whistled her birdcall, raised the dish with her beautiful round arms, and Casimir came and stood on her hand while he ate. "Look at that!" she called. "He remembers me!"

Arne asked, "How long do they live?"

"Forty years, if they're lucky."

"And they always come back?"

"Always."

Arne was the first to see the eider. She was sitting on her nest under a bush by the steps, almost indistinguishable against the gray-brown spring soil.

"A good omen," said Elsa earnestly. "And she didn't fly away even when we came near. Now she'll stay till her chicks hatch. Isn't that lovely?"

Arne studied the eider, fascinated. To him the bird's long face seemed full of patience and wisdom. She sat completely still.

He said, "I've never seen an eider before. I'll sit here on the steps for a bit."

"You do that, darling. I'll unpack."

Arne sat a long time watching the motionless bird, a clever bird that knew she had nothing to fear.

Very slowly he walked past her and farther up across the island. But as he neared the navigation marker at the high end, he was attacked. A raging swarm of howling birds dive-bombed him, again and again, purposefully and maliciously, like Stukas. He screamed back at them and waved his arms in panic. He felt their wings beating on his head and suddenly he was bitten, a wicked little nip. He cowered on the granite with his arms over his face shouting, “Elsa! Elsa!”

She came running and shouting at the same time, “It’s their nests! There are a lot of nests on this side. I should have warned you.”

They went back down to the cottage, and he flung himself on the bed and stared at the wall.

“I’m so sorry,” said Elsa. “They’re very aggressive at this time of year and there are too many of them. And if you stand up to them it makes it worse—”

“Don’t I know it. Too many children in every class, in every bloody class. And if you stand up to them, it just makes it worse. Don’t say it. I’m going to sleep.”

Towards evening he went out to have a look at the eider. Two gulls were giving a strange performance on the rock slope nearby. With a rapid series of short sharp cries and powerfully flapping wings, the cock besieged his hen.

Arne went back inside. “It’s bestial,” he said. “It’s disgusting.”

“Do you think so? I think it’s beautiful. Shall we have vegetable soup today or would you rather have chicken?”

“Whichever you like. I don’t care.”

Elsa lay awake listening to the cries of the long-tailed ducks. She would have enjoyed telling him about the long-tailed ducks, those mysterious birds, and getting him to listen for their seductive calls far out at sea, but after the incident with the terns she didn’t dare talk about birds. His hands had started to shake again and for several days he wouldn’t leave the house. He’d only go as far as the steps, where he would sit and watch the eider. Once he said, “She seems so content with everything, doesn’t she?” And he asked when the chicks would hatch.

Casimir had become a problem for Elsa. The tapping at the

window had to stop. She moved the box he liked to stand on and hid his food dish. But wherever she went, the huge bird followed her with his plaintive, ingratiating chirping. Arne watched and made sarcastic remarks. In the end she practically stopped going out. It was only while Arne was reading or asleep that she rushed through her outdoor chores, threw Casimir's food on the granite slope, and sneaked back into the house. They had become excessively cautious with each other and talked only about safe everyday trivia.

Then one night the wind changed and began to blow from the northeast. The shift in the wind woke Elsa, and she went to the window to check on the boat.

"Arne," she said, "the boat's pulling at her moorings."

Down by the shore she was careful to explain what needed to be done. He took time over it and fixed the lines quite passably. The birds were silent.

In the morning Arne was in a better mood than she'd seen him in for quite some time. Thank God, he was finally cheerful. As usual he went to look at the eider, who was sleeping under her rosebush.

"She's asleep," he whispered. "When the leaves open, she'll feel more protected. Don't you think?"

"Oh yes," said Elsa. "She'll be just fine, then. Why don't we go for a walk along the shore and look for firewood? We're out of kindling and I can't get the big pieces to burn without it."

"I can fix that," said Arne. "I'll go and chop you some kindling. Easy, it'll take no time at all."

She let him go, forgetting about the gull that nested beside the woodpile every year. When she finally remembered and rushed out to call him back, it was too late. She met him coming back with the ax dangling from his hand. He threw himself down on the bed and said, "There were three eggs."

"What do you mean?"

"Three eggs. Three birds. I threw them in the water. Plus the nest." He was silent a moment, then said, "The nest floated away. But the eggs sank like stones, straight to the bottom."

Elsa stood and stared at his dismissive back. She didn't want to tell him that if you take away a seabird's nest and eggs, she'll just build a new nest and lay new eggs in exactly the same place. She went down to the woodpile, found the crime scene, filled the

place with stones, then waited behind the shed till the gull came back. The bird examined the stones, tried to cover them with her body, got up again, walked around, sat still for a while, tried again, then began collecting dry grass in her beak and stuffing it clumsily between the stones.

"You idiot," Elsa whispered. "You damned, stupid idiot . . ." She wanted to weep, and suddenly she was sick and tired of Arne and all his imaginary terrors, his pretentious sensitivities. She ran to the cottage and sat on the edge of his bed and gave him a detailed and somewhat cruel account of the gull searching for her eggs.

He listened in silence and then when she had finished he turned and lay on his back and just looked at her. Then he smiled. "So what shall we play at now? Try to scare each other? Hunt for eggs? It was you who said we should find some silly game to play."

Elsa got up, went to the kitchen counter, angrily prepared Casimir's food dish, threw open the door, and whistled.

Arne shouted, "You'll disturb the eider! Can't you feed that damned gull on the other side of the house!"

Casimir came. The same persistent piercing cry, the same strong soft wings touching her face, the same firm grip on her hand. She laughed out loud, let the dish fall, and grabbed the gull with both hands, overcoming the powerful resistance of his wings. It was just exactly as she had imagined it, a great silken-smooth life force caught and held in her hands. To her astonishment, the rare, furious joy of clasping the creature in her arms suddenly went right through her and took her breath away —and at that moment the huge bird twisted out of her grasp, soared out over the shore, and vanished. It was very quiet. Elsa stood where she was without turning around.

Arne said, "I was watching." His voice was distant and dry.

It was a mild, overcast day, the sort of hesitant weather when nothing seems to move. The leaves of the rosebush were on the point of opening, wrinkled and light green. Arne didn't look at the eider but he knew she was still there, an honorable companion.

They probably should have brought a radio with them but they'd finally decided on a long, blessed silence. That had been the plan. Towards evening a thick mist rolled in from the sea,

bringing an even deeper silence. In an instant the island became unreal, diminished, as if the cottage's four windows had blinders of thick white wool. Ideal conditions for the eider to take her chicks down to the water.

Elsa made their evening tea. They drank it while reading their books. After tea, Arne went out on the steps—at just the right moment. The eider was making her way slowly down the slope, her chicks in a line behind her. It was unbelievable, fantastic, such a remarkable thing to see that he called to Elsa so she could see it too. And at that moment came a powerful beating of wings and a great white bird dived out of the sky and seized one of the chicks. As Arne watched in helpless horror, the eider chick disappeared down the bird's throat bit by bit. He screamed, rushed forward, picked up a stone, and threw it. Never before in his life had Arne thrown anything straight and true, but he did so now. The bird fell on the granite slope, wings outspread like an open flower, whiter than the mist, with the legs of the eider chick still sticking out of its mouth.

"Elsa, I'll kill you!" he cried.

She was standing beside him. She touched his arm lightly and said, "Look, they're marching along undisturbed."

The eider and her remaining chicks were heading on down to the water where they disappeared into the mist.

He turned to her. "Don't you see what's happened? I've killed Casimir. I attacked him, took him out!" Wildly excited, he lifted the dead bird by one wing and walked down towards the water to throw it into the sea. Elsa stood and watched him go. She decided to remain silent and not tell him that this wasn't Casimir, or even a herring gull that he was consigning to the deep. And that, of course, her own gull would never come back.

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

CORRESPONDENCE

DEAR Jansson san

I'm a girl from Japan.
I'm thirteen years old and two months.
On the eighth of January I'll be fourteen.
I have a mother and two little sisters.
I've read everything you've written.
When I've read something I read it one more time.
Then I think about snow and how to be alone.
Tokyo's a very big city.
I'm learning English and studying very seriously.
I love you.
I dream one day I'll be as old as you and as clever as you.
I have many dreams.
There's a Japanese kind of poem called haiku.
I'm sending you a haiku in Japanese
It's about cherry flowers.
Do you live in a big forest?

Forgive me for writing to you.
I wish you good health and a long life.
Tamiko Atsumi

Dear Jansson san

My new birthday today is very important.
Your present is very important to me.
Everyone admires your present and the picture of the little island where you live.
It's hanging above my bed.
How many lonely islands are there in Finland?
Can anyone live there who wants to?
I want to live on an island.
I love lonely islands and I love flowers and snow.

But I can't write how they are.
I'm studying very seriously.
I read your books in English.
Your books aren't the same in Japanese.
Why are they different?
I think you are happy.
Look after your health very carefully.

I wish you a long life.
Tamiko Atsumi

Dear Jansson san

It's been a long time, for five months and nine days you haven't written to me.
Did you get my letters?
Did you get the presents?
I long for you.
You must understand that I'm studying very seriously.
Now I'll tell you about my dream.
My dream is to travel to other countries and learn their languages and learn to understand.
I want to be able to talk with you.
I want you to talk with me.
You must tell me how you describe things without seeing other houses and with no one getting in the way.
I want to know how to write about snow.
I want to sit at your feet and learn.
I'm collecting money so I can travel.
Now I'm sending you a new haiku.
It's about a very old woman who sees blue mountains far away.
When she was young she didn't see them.
Now she can't reach them.
That's a beautiful haiku.

I beg you please be careful.
Tamiko

Dear Jansson san

You were going to go on a great long journey, now you've been traveling more than six months.
I think you've come back again.
Where did you go, my Jansson san, and what did you learn on your journey?
Perhaps you took with you a kimono.
In autumn colors and autumn is the time to travel.
But you've said so often that time is short.
My time grows long when I think of you.
I want to become old like you and have only big clever thoughts.
I keep your letters in a very beautiful box in a secret place.
I read them again at sundown.

Tamiko

Dear Jansson san

Once you wrote to me when it was summer in Finland and you were living on the lonely island.
You've told me that post hardly ever comes to your island.
Then do you get many letters from me at once?
You say it feels nice when the ships go by and don't stop.
But now it's winter in Finland.
You've written a book about winter, you've described my dream.
I'll write a story to help everyone understand and recognize their own dream.
How old must you be to write a story?
But I can't write my story without you.
Every day is a day of waiting.
You've said you're so tired.
You work and there are too many people.
But I want to be the one who comforts you and protects your solitude.
This is a sad haiku about someone who waited too long for the one they loved.
You see how it went!
But it's not so good in translation.

Has my English got any better?

Always
Tamiko

Much loved Jansson san, thank you!

Yes, that's how it is, you don't have to be a certain age, you just begin writing a story because you have to, about what you know or also about what you long for, about your dream, the unknown. O much loved Jansson san. One mustn't worry about others and what they think and understand, because while you're telling a story you're only concerned with the story and yourself. Then you really are on your own. At this moment I know all about what it's like to love someone far away and I will hurry to write about it before she comes nearer. I send you a haiku again, it's about a little stream which becomes happy in spring so everyone listens and feels delight. I can't translate it. Listen to me Jansson san and write to say when I can come. I've collected money and I think I'll get a travel scholarship. What month would be best and most beautiful for our meeting?

Tamiko

Dear Jansson san

Thank you for your very wise letter.
I understand the forest's big in Finland and the sea too but your house is very small.
It's a beautiful thought, to meet a writer only in her books.
I'm learning all the time.

I wish you good health and a long life.

Your Tamiko Atsumi

My Jansson san

It's been snowing all day.
I'm learning to write about snow.
Today my mother died.
When you're the eldest in your family in Japan, you can't leave home and don't want to.
I hope you understand me. I thank you.
The poem is by Lang Shih Yiian, who was once a great poet in China.
It has been translated into your language by Hwang Tsu-Yii and Alf Henrikson.
"Wild geese scream shrilly on muffled winds.
The morning snow is heavy, weather cloudy and cold.
Poor, I can give you nothing in parting
but the blue mountains and they'll always be with you."

Tamiko

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

LETTERS FROM KLARA

DEAR MATILDA,

You're hurt because I forgot your venerable birthday. That's unreasonable of you. I know the only reason you've looked forward to getting birthday greetings from me all these years is because I'm three years younger than you are. But it's time you realized that the passing of the years isn't in itself a feather in your cap.

You're asking for Guidance from Above, excellent. But while you're waiting for it to arrive, might it not be profitable to discuss a few bad habits which I have to admit aren't totally alien to me, either.

My dear Matilda, one thing we should all remember is not to grumble if we can possibly help it, because grumbling immediately gives bad habits the upper hand. I know you've been fortunate enough to enjoy astonishingly good health, but you do have a unique capacity for giving those around you a bad conscience by grumbling, and then of course they hit back by cheerfully writing you off as someone who no longer matters. I know, I've seen it. Whatever it is you want or don't want, couldn't you stop whining? Why not try raising your voice instead and shaking them up with a few strong words or, best of all, scaring them a bit? I know very well you're capable of it: There was never any mewing in the old days, far from it.

And all that stuff about not being able to get to sleep at night, presumably because you catnap eight times a day. Yes, I know; it's true that memory has an unfortunate habit of working backwards at night and gnawing its way through everything without sparing the slightest detail—that you were too much of a coward to do something, for instance; that you made a wrong choice, or were tactless or unfeeling or criminally unobservant—but of course no one but you has given a thought for years to these things which to you are calamities, shameful actions, and irretrievably stupid statements! Isn't it unfair, when we're endowed with such sharp memories, that they only function in

reverse?

Dear Matilda, do write and tell me what you think about these sensitive matters. I promise I'll try not to be a know-it-all; oh yes, don't deny it, you have called me that in the past. But I'd be fascinated to know, for example, what you do when you can't remember how many times you've said the same thing to the same person. Do you extricate yourself by starting off "So, as I said . . ." or "As I may have already said . . ."? Or what? . . . Have you any other suggestions? Or d'you just keep quiet?

And do you let conversations you can't follow continue over your head? Do you ever try to make a sensible contribution only to find that everyone else has moved on to a completely different subject? Do you try to save face by telling them they're talking nonsense or wasting their time on matters too trivial to be worth discussing? In general, are we any of us in the least interested? Please reassure me that we are!

Only if you write to me, please don't use that antediluvian fountain pen of yours; it makes your writing illegible, and in any case it's hopelessly out of date. Get them to buy you some felt pens, medium point 0.5 mm. You can get them anywhere.

Yours, Klara

P.S. I read somewhere that anything written in felt pen becomes illegible after about forty years. How about that? Good, don't you think? Or are you planning to write your memoirs? You know the sort of thing: "Not to be read for fifty years" (I hope you think that's funny).

Dear Ewald,

What a nice surprise to get a letter from you. What gave you the idea of writing?

Yes, of course we can meet; it's been ages, as you say. Something like sixty years, I think.

And thank you for all the nice things you wrote—maybe a little too nice, my dear old friend. Hasn't time made you a little sentimental?

Yes, I think growing roses is a great idea! I understand there's a very practical gardening program on the radio every Saturday morning, repeated on Sundays. Why not listen to it?

Give me a call any time, but remember it may take me a while to get to the phone. And don't forget to say whether you're still a vegetarian, because I want to make us a really special dinner.

Yes, do bring your photograph album, I hope we'll be able to have a reasonable stab at dealing with the inevitable "d'you remembers," and then go on to talk about whatever comes into our heads.

Yours sincerely, Klara

Hi Steffy!

Thanks for the bark boat, it's beautiful and it's lovely to have it. I tried it out in the bath and it balances perfectly.

Don't worry about that report, tell Daddy and Mommy it's sometimes much more important to be able to work with your hands and make something beautiful.

I'm sorry about the cat. But if she lived to be seventeen she was probably quite tired and no longer very well. The words you wrote for her grave aren't bad but you must take care with the rhythm. We'll talk more about that when we meet.

Your godmother, Klara

Dear Mr. Öhlander,

In your letter of the 27th you claim that I am unjustifiably withholding from you an early work of your own, which you say you need to have, as soon as possible, for a retrospective exhibition.

I cannot remember that during a visit to your niece's son I "wangled" the picture in question out of him; he is much more likely to have pressed me to remove it from his flat.

I have made a careful study of the signatures on the works I have around me here and can just about make out one which could possibly be your own. The picture seems to show something halfway between an interior and a landscape; one might say that there's a *je ne sais quoi* of the semi-abstract about it.

The size, which you didn't mention, is the classic French 50 × 61.

I'm restoring your work to you by return of post and I hope that it will now be able to take its rightful place in your

collection.

Yours faithfully, Klara Nygård

Dear Nicholas,

I expect you've only just got back from your "mystery destination" (I have a strong feeling it was Majorca); be that as it may, I've decided to make yet another small change to my will. Don't groan, I know that deep down all this to-ing and fro-ing amuses you.

Well, I want to make over a fixed annual sum to the Old People's Home of whose services I shall one day be availing myself. But—and this is the important point—only during my lifetime. Interest from banks and bonds and whatever else, I can do without—you know more about that than I do. They can use the money in whatever way suits them best.

I'm sure you've got the idea, cunning as you are. This temporary extra income will make it worth their while, at the Home, to do their best to keep me alive as long as they can; I shall be their mascot and will obviously be able to take certain liberties. What's left when I die will not go to them but must be divided up exactly as we planned earlier.

By the way, I'm in excellent health and I hope you are too.

Klara

My dear Cecilia,

It was so nice of you to send me my old letters; what an enormous box, did you at least have someone to help you get it to the post? It really touches me that you saved them all (and even numbered them), but, my dear, that business of reading them through—you understand what I mean? I suppose the stamps were cut off for some stamp-collecting child. But if you have any other correspondence from the beginning of the century you should keep the whole envelope, stamps and all; that'll make the stamps much more desirable to a philatelist—and be specially careful with blocks of four.

I assume you're busy clearing out the house—very natural. Congratulations! I'm doing the same and I've been gradually learning all kinds of things, one being that if you give special treasures to young people they're not usually particularly pleased

to have them. If you persist, they get more and more polite and more and more irritated. Have you noticed? But, do you know, there's a flea market every Saturday and Sunday in Sandvikstorg square these days—how about that? Anyone can go there and find what they want for themselves without needing to feel either put upon or grateful. Brilliant idea.

You say you're gloomy and depressed but that's normal, Cecilia, nothing to worry about. I've read somewhere that it's a physiological phenomenon, doesn't that make you feel better? I mean, you feel depressed, so you sit down and think, "Oh well, it doesn't matter, there's nothing I can do about it, it's just the way things are." Isn't that the truth?

What else shall I tell you—oh, yes, I've got rid of my potted plants and I'm trying to learn a little French. You know, I've always admired you; you speak the language so perfectly. What's that elegant way they have of ending a letter?—*Chère madame,* I enclose you, no, me, in your—oh you know.

I'm just a beginner.

Chère petite madame, I do miss you sometimes—

Love, Klara

Dear Sven Roger,

So good of you to make sure the porcelain tiled stove's in working order again. If those officials come back and say it's against the law to light it I shall speak to my solicitor; the stove's an article of Historic Importance, as we're all well aware.

When you come back from your holiday you'll find that Mrs. Fagerholm from the floor above me has gone in for an unnecessarily sweeping clearance of her attic storage space. She parked her unnameable possessions in front of my own space, so I naturally threw the whole lot out into the corridor.

I remember you once said you'd like some indoor plants for your summer cottage. I've put my own collection of potted plants out in the yard next to the garbage cans and anyone's welcome to take what they want; anything left can go into the trash. I'll keep them watered for the time being. To explain my apparently heartless behavior, I'd just like to say that these potted plants have weighed on my conscience for far too long; they always get either too little water or too much, one can never get it right.

By the way, don't hurry to wash the windows; they have what

looks like an attractive light mist on them just at the moment; it would be a pity to disturb it. With my very best wishes for your summer holiday,

K. Nygård

P.S. Don't say anything to the Fagerholm woman. I have to admit I really enjoyed throwing out her rubbish.

Camilla Alleén
"Woman to Woman"

Dear Ms. Alleén,

Thank you for your kind letter. But I do not consider myself to be in a position to take part, as you put it, in an enquiry into the problems and pleasures of old age.

One could of course maintain that, though taking part might be difficult, it could also be interesting—but I don't see any point in listing one's obvious misfortunes, while trying to describe what's interesting about being old seems to me to be a private matter most unsuited to the dogmatic statements demanded by questionnaires.

My dear Ms. Alleén, I'm afraid you're not very likely to get many honest answers to your questions.

Yours sincerely, Klara Nygård

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

MY BELOVED UNCLES

HOWEVER tired of each other they must have grown from time to time, there was always great solidarity among Pastor Fredrik Hammarsten's children—four boys and two girls. The girls married quite young and moved to other countries, far enough away that the others could think of them without concern or annoyance. But Torsten, Einar, Olov, and Harald continued to live in Stockholm, where Grandfather was the preacher at Jakob's Church. Maybe they knew one another too well to socialize in the usual way, but they couldn't help being aware of one another's various activities and sometimes foolish opinions.

Sister Elsa married a priest and moved to Germany, and Mama married a sculptor and went to Finland. She signed her drawings Ham, but Uncle Einar called her Signe.

I knew that when they were young and Uncle Einar's studies were at their most intense, it was Ham who watched over his work and saw to it that none of his strength or confidence went to waste. She was tireless and ambitious on his behalf.

And then she went away. What a triumph it must have been when she learned that Uncle Einar had been named Professor of Medical Chemistry at the Karolinska Institute! He must have written to tell her, because we had no telephone.

Mama never said a word about being homesick, but as often as she could, she took me out of school and sent me over to her brothers to see what they were up to and to tell them what was happening with us, and the most important part was seeing Uncle Einar and trying to get a sense of how his scientific work was going.

"It's going all right," he said. "You can tell Signe that I think it's moving in the right direction, but very slowly."

"How so?" I said, sitting at the ready with pen and paper.

Uncle Einar gazed at me for a moment and then said very amiably that cancer was like a string of beads where it's impossible to remove one of the beads from the others without the whole necklace going to pieces.

I was disappointed. Apparently he thought I was still a child. But the next day, Uncle Einar had made a sketch of it, and I made a copy to send home.

The big move came when I was fifteen. I finally got to quit school and leave home and go live with Uncle Einar and Aunt Anna Lisa while I tried to learn my future profession. I took the SS *Oihonna* to a new life in Sweden. It was only gradually that I developed quite a compact homesickness, but it didn't keep me from being happy, sort of like a balloon that's lost its string.

Uncle Einar had a nimbus that I called a halo. He could radiate approval or disapproval, shine on you or cast a shadow, and he did it without a word. He was uncompromising about only one thing, and that was giving your job everything you had; giving it all your strength and your total time and attention, and, moreover, all the joy and pleasure you thought was your private possession. Uncle Einar could come home from Karolinska bitterly disappointed because once again someone had behaved badly and shown signs of careerism, had sought attention wherever it might be found, or—worst of all—had stooped to writing articles for the popular press for money. That they were young—the same poor young men who admired Uncle Einar more than anyone—was no excuse. If only they had stopped to consider the way he turned up his nose at the Nobel Prize, despite being one of the men who awarded it.

I went on with my own work, and every time I finished something I ran to Uncle Einar and showed it to him.

"Good," he'd say. "Continue. You know what this is all about. You're here to work like a dog so you can go back home and help Signe."

And I worked, on and on and on. It seemed endless.

Uncle Einar and Aunt Anna Lisa lived on Norr Mälarstrand, which was a very fine address. There were only two or three pieces of furniture in each room. My beautiful new life gave me a fleeting sense of superiority, but I was held down to earth by being constantly reminded that the world expects much of the gifted and that having talent is never an excuse for not using it.

Sometimes I took the train to Vällingby, where Uncle Torsten

lived with his large family. You came in and stamped off the snow in the back hall, which was full of skis and boots, and it was warm and the radio was blaring and Uncle Torsten called out, “Hello dear niece, how are things in the higher spheres? Come in and try to be ordinary if you can and how’s your mother?”

He didn’t think I should worry so much about what I would become, one way or the other. It doesn’t usually work out anyway, because other things come up that you never counted on. In addition, you should avoid a bad conscience like the plague, because it gets hold of you and grows and grows until you no longer remember why you started feeling bad. I wrote down everything he said.

Trying to be like the people you admire can be difficult, but no one would ever even dare try to be like Uncle Torsten because he’s inimitable! Even in his early years, it was clear that he was going to be a mining engineer. He loved explosions.

He wanted to make people jump, and he was really good at it. One time he drilled holes in a grindstone and filled them with gunpowder and lit it inside Grandfather’s tile stove, and it flew out the window and down into the neighbor’s greenhouse! There are lots more stories I could tell.

Aunt Anna Lisa says he’s threatened to write his memoirs, but I don’t think he will.

One of his most successful adventures was apparently when they sent him to America because he was the family ne’er-do-well. Over there he was guarding fish in Alaska, among other things, and did business with the Indians and had a really exciting time.

Once when I was still a girl, Uncle Torsten gave me a ring with a genuine little diamond. He smuggled it over to Helsingfors (although there wasn’t even a war at the time). He very cleverly bored a hiding place for it in one of the family hymnals.

But don’t get the idea that Uncle Torsten is the only adventurous one in the family! Against all his principles, Uncle Einar could knock on my attic door on a perfectly ordinary weekday evening and holler, “Stop working! We’re going to the circus. The taxi’s waiting!”

Aunt Anna Lisa always came along, but I was never sure if she liked the circus. She applauded very slowly, without taking off

her gloves. I tried to do likewise.

It's hard to explain in just what way I loved Aunt Anna Lisa, possibly with something a little less than love but absolutely more than admiration and respect. She used to make fun of her aristocratic maiden name, and Uncle Einar thought these little jokes were funny, but I thought they were dumb.

Nevertheless, Aunt Anna Lisa was a lady. Never the slightest exaggeration, either in tone or attire or choice of words. Her pearls were small, but they were real.

Sometimes I had the feeling that every time I used the wrong word in the wrong place at the wrong time, it cut through her like a little knife of displeasure. She'd close her eyes and smile, a weary smile, but she never said anything, never once.

I think it must be almost impossibly hard to be a lady. You have to be born to it. Whenever I'd behaved especially badly, I'd buy a big azalea, preferably white or pink, and put it on the floor in the middle of the parlor. Once I hid behind the drapes and waited for Uncle Einar to come home. He stopped in mid-stride, grabbed his head with both hands, and whispered, "No . . . not again . . ."

That was before he furnished the parlor with a big aquarium for tropical fish, wonderfully beautiful, especially after I painted a dramatic backdrop, but the whole thing broke one day when no one was home. That was no reason for Uncle Torsten to call and ask if we were all on a fish diet. Very corny.

Anyway, Uncle Einar redid the parlor in a completely different way. He turned it into a wonderful landscape for electric trains, even with a real waterfall that ran day and night! He did it just before cousin Ulla was born, and when she came into the world he sent an entire flower shop to the hospital—just rushed in and cried, "Send everything you've got—mostly orchids!"

And then it was just Ulla this and Ulla that, from dawn to dusk nothing but Cousinulla. She grew and started looking quite human, but she was an unusually whiny baby and she didn't like electric trains or circuses either, although she did learn to clap her hands.

Before I started to worry about not being fair, I just went along loving everyone as usual, not only my uncles but even to a certain extent their wives. And then, suddenly, something happened that divided the family into "for" and "against," and of

course I had to dislike everyone who didn't agree with Uncle Einar. It started when he decided to celebrate Christmas in South Africa with his family but without a tree or any of the other traditions.

Some of the wives had a thing or two to say about that—that it was un-Swedish and nothing but an affectation—although what could you expect from a man who insisted that the Swedish flag was ugly?

"He wasn't the one who said that," said Uncle Torsten. "That was me! But this thing with South Africa sounds terrific. Can't think of a better way of avoiding all the angelic mewling and the exchanging of goods—you just go to the other end of the earth!"

Uncle Olov wasn't interested and just then Uncle Harald was off skiing somewhere. There wouldn't have been any serious problem if it hadn't been for Uncle Einar's 8-millimeter movies that he brought home from Africa and wanted to show the family. It didn't turn out well. They weren't generous. I was really ashamed of them. There's a big difference between "looking" and "seeing" ("contemplating" is another thing entirely and I haven't finished thinking it through), and they looked the way you look at a photo album although they had an authentic African moving picture right before their eyes!

Uncle Einar gave a running commentary while he cranked the film but it didn't help them see any better, I mean, they couldn't see *the unseen*—for example, the way Uncle Einar was almost eaten by a shark while Aunt Anna Lisa stood helpless on the beach or how delicate little Cousinulla got heat stroke in the desert and practically shriveled to a piece of popcorn!

Otherwise I can only say that, given the equipment available at the time, Uncle Einar's film was very sophisticated.

In any case, Uncle Olov expressed interest in the way the giraffe galloped. After the show, he went out into the front hall with Uncle Einar and they talked for quite a while.

For much of his life, Uncle Olov has been searching for an insect which, as I understand it, would confirm important conclusions put forth in his dissertation. He teaches biology and lives in Äppelviken with his family. The house has a large, deep cellar, and that's his workshop. He goes down there right after school and works at building his boat. Or else he works at his lathe or carves little animals out of wood. One Christmas he

carved the holy family even though he's an atheist (not that that usually stops anyone).

It's very hard to tell if Uncle Olov really dislikes being admired—maybe he secretly enjoys it. He avoids strong words. If something has been fantastically wonderful he says it was nice, and if it was ghastly he says it was not very nice.

That used to make me mad, but sometimes I tried to do the same thing myself. I wasn't any good at it.

Sometimes on a Sunday we'd go out to a marsh near Äppelviken if he could get his inboard motor started. Then we'd search for his important insect. I never heard if he ever found it. Sometimes I think maybe I met Uncle Olov too soon and that was really a shame.

The only thing that actually worried me about him was that he couldn't believe in God. Of all Grandfather's sons, he was the only one who simply didn't care about any of it. The others could have violent discussions for and against. Uncle Einar was ironic and Uncle Torsten blasphemous, or vice versa, but Uncle Olov was just embarrassed and walked away.

I was reading the Bible for the second time just then—in order to be really sure, once and for all—and I was doing worse at school and I didn't know what to believe. Then Uncle Einar discovered my Bible under the mattress and told me to wait for a while. "This is dangerous stuff," he said. It was a huge relief, but I locked myself in the bathroom anyway and cried. Aunt Anna Lisa stood outside and promised me a new winter coat with leather, so after a while I came out again.

It was a lovely coat with a rabbit collar.

I wonder if my uncles talked about God in the summers at Ängsmarn. Not likely. They probably talked mostly about the things that concerned them all—the dock, the well, the black-currant bushes, the garbage dump, stuff like that.

It was Grandfather who found Ängsmarn sometime in the 1800s, a long green meadow that went right down to the water and the bay for swimming, all of it protected by cliffs and forest. There he built the big family house, and that's where the Hammarstens spent their summers as they were growing up. Then they reproduced rapidly and went on building for their descendants wherever they could find space, beside every bay and on every point and rocky hill. Each of them built differently,

obstinately, and as far from the big family house as possible. I'm sorry to say that none of them even had seashells around their flower beds.

Uncle Torsten built his himself. It turned out a bit ungainly somehow, because he kept making changes and adding on and letting his children help as best they could.

But it was Anderson who built Uncle Olov's house, a well-planned log cottage along traditional Swedish lines. The discreet furnishings were all from Better Things for Everyday Living and Svenskt Tenn, with hardly any of the bowls and boxes he'd made in his cellar himself.

Uncle Harald didn't want to build at all. He liked spending the night in the old washhouse, which had space for a sleeping bag in the front room, "almost at the edge of the blue Atlantic" etcetera. Harald knew all of Evert Taube's songs and had a good voice. When he bathed in the washhouse, I'd sit outside and listen and write down the words.

Uncle Einar's house needs explanation. I mean, it was never meant to be the way it turned out. They say it's no one's fault when things go badly, but that doesn't make it any better. It was Anderson did the building, and Uncle Einar had complete confidence in him. He built and built, but Uncle Einar never took any interest or went out to look, and so the windows were too narrow and the stairs too steep and in general the whole thing was too big and too ramshackle up there on its granite hilltop.

I don't think Uncle Einar noticed that anything was wrong. Just at that time he was interested in getting all the roads and paths at Ängsmarn covered with marble chips, all the way to the cow meadow. Anderson did the work very capably, although the chips immediately sank into the ground and vanished. The white marble roads must have been wonderful and astonishing. It was a shame that Uncle Einar never had time to go out and see them before they disappeared.

As a rule, he went out to Ängsmarn so early in the spring that no one was there yet, or else so late in the autumn that everything was closed up. He called it a safari. First he bought lobster and pheasant and put them in his pathologist's ice chest. He brought home all the other necessities for a stay in the wilderness, and then came the great packing—systematic and very rapid. No one was allowed to help. Uncle Einar loaded

everything into the car and then said, “Come and get in. Safari!”

He wrapped Aunt Anna Lisa in her mink, Cousinulla squawked to high heaven, and off we went.

I got to sit in the front seat beside him. He drove wisely and lightheartedly and quite fast.

We didn’t talk until we got to the cow meadow when Uncle Einar asked me how I planned to spend this special day, and I said, “Studying for my perspective exam.” And he asked if it was important for my career or just for the grade and I said just the grade and so that was the end of that.

But now things got very difficult. Uncle Einar’s house was completely frozen, cold as ice. Anderson hadn’t split firewood and built fires the way he’d promised.

“Just stay in the car,” Uncle Einar said. He went to the woodpile and after a while I heard him chopping. And I knew that he loved to chop wood.

It was an excellent safari.

Uncle Einar laid a fire in the fireplace and got it started. He gave us hot rum with ginger and butter (Cousinulla got warm juice) and then he went out to the kitchen to prepare the pheasant.

But the whole time I couldn’t stop worrying about Anderson, who hadn’t done his job. Did Anderson understand what he’d done and that now and forever, irretrievably, Uncle Einar would despise him? On the other hand, if Uncle Einar understood that Anderson’s treachery had produced a more convincing safari—might that help him set aside his contempt without sacrificing his self-respect? I try to believe that a person should never deviate an inch from his principles even if it’s impractical. Nevertheless, if you look at the thing morally, I mean naturally, didn’t Anderson’s treachery stop being treachery when it turned out that Uncle Einar liked chopping wood?

I did a lot of thinking.

It was a beautiful spring evening, utterly quiet, only the long-tailed ducks yodeling far out to sea. I decided to sleep outdoors. Near the woodpile there is a large pine tree that spreads out nicely. Uncle Einar thought it was a fine idea. “You do that,” he said. “Most people come back inside about four a.m.”

When I came back in where it was warm, no one had made a bed for me so I had to sleep wherever I could find, and they

didn't say anything in the morning either. There was sunshine all night and icy cold. I went for a swim among floating ice in the swimming bay and I'm pretty sure Uncle Einar saw me do it, but he pretended not to.

Otherwise it was a pretty bad time for me. School was not going well and I started brooding about silly things and getting all sad for no reason.

That spring, Uncle Harald lived in the room next to mine up in the attic. We'd meet on the stairs and he'd say, "Hi, adored niece, how are things?" And I'd say, "Shit and ginger!" quoting Uncle Torsten. And Harald, quoting Evert Taube, would say, "A meeting in the monsoon," and go whistling on down the stairs to the street.

In some ways, he was the most famous of all my uncles, maybe not as a lecturer in mathematics but as a great sailor, downhill skier, and mountain climber—all in all, a *daredevil*. Harald was Grandmother's last child. He arrived long after his brothers had begun to go their own ways and so of course he felt little and scared, and on top of it all they made fun of him!

He let me illustrate his logbooks. I've designed his monogram, in color, with a sail and a mountain. S.A. stands for Sea-Alpinism.

Harald's crews loved him and were as young as he was, but one way and another they grew older and got married and all that stuff, and they no longer had time. Once that melancholy spring Uncle Harald came and asked casually what my position was on Sea-

Alpinism—in principle.

He wanted me to come along. Even though he knew I was really bad at sailing and skiing and scared to death of mountains, he still wanted me to go with him! I said no. And my heart was about to break from pride and despair.

The last spring there I got a scholarship.

I ran to Uncle Einar and cried, "Look what I've got!"

"Very good," he said. That was all, just "very good."

I took my scholarship in the smallest bills the bank had and went home and tossed them up to the ceiling and let them rain down over me like Danaë's golden rain, but it just felt silly so I ran to Uncle Einar again and shouted, "So what did *you* do? What did you do the first time you had your own money?"

He said, “It was burning a hole in my pocket. I had to get rid of it, as quickly as possible. I had to buy the most important thing I could think of.”

And he went out and bought a dreadfully tiny bottle of attar of roses.

I think he did exactly the right thing.

Some people say Uncle Einar is a snob, and I sincerely hope I can develop along the same lines.

Translated by Thomas Teal

LETTERS TO KONIKOVA

A Friday, 1941

EVA, YOU went away.

How can a room be so *empty* even though it's full of junk, tell me that, Eva Konikova; you've left a mess behind and how am I supposed to know who should get what—Boris or Abrascha, your mother or Ada Indursky? Should I give the keys to the super or should I hold on to them for the time being, and what should I do with all the papers in the bottom drawer, and did you forget the green bag or did you mean to chuck it—and it's *locked*! You never had time to give me any sensible directions because there were always those eternal farewell parties where you sang your Russian ballads and your friends wept when they weren't arguing politics, and it was all so Jewish and emotional . . .

Forgive me, you know I'm your friend, but I'm angry, and why should the whole gang come to the station to see you off, the dramatic last train to Petsamo, for heaven's sake, I never had time to show you my list of questions, all the things your admirers have no clue about because they are so *impractical*!

Did you hear those people standing there talking drivel about how awful it is when the train is about to leave but it doesn't, and you've already said just about everything you have to say but still nothing at all. They've noticed *that*, yes indeed, but still they can't express themselves!

Your mother keeps calling. She sounds hurt.

Do you think things will be so much better in America? You don't speak even *bad* English.

The super has delivered your laundry, do you really want it?

Not one single person at the railroad station behaved naturally and not me either. I mean, I was quiet.

When Eva Konikova leaves the continent there's nothing more to say, ha ha. I'm sure you miss me.

Your beloved friend

P.S. And for that matter, think hard about why you left. Are you

really sure why? I think you just use the war that's coming as an excuse. You want to move on again, it's your eternal need to drift —and of course to grieve endlessly about everything you're giving up and want to be rid of. No?

Now you're playing Brave Pioneer. Sorry. I'll write my first letter to you soon.

You're feeling free, aren't you?

Otherwise I can't forgive you.

Another day

Now you're on the ship.

You said once that you feel like an albatross, and I thought that sounded a little too elegant, but now I understand better. It must be like flying a glider—just soaring out over the precipice and seeing the world beneath you. You know what Nietzsche wrote: I see the world beneath me, here the air is free and pure and the heart is filled with a happy malice. Or something like that. Intense, isn't it?

Your thirtieth birthday party was marvelous, a huge success. But why were you crying so hard afterward, you're not so awfully old yet? And that stuff about not having accomplished anything—where would you find the time? You spend all your energy *living*. Didn't it feel grand always being right in the middle of everything that happened to us, clearly right at the center? Everything that happened around you was either fantastic or tragic, our own sorrows and problems were awfully small compared to yours, we hardly dared take them seriously—but you explained nothing, you stayed in character and sailed overhead . . .

Someday when I get to thirty, I'm going to take it really calmly, I think, and think of it as a milepost. There will be others. The most important will be having my own solo show.

Now she is certainly out on the Atlantic.

If she was here, I would ask straight out—which is more important when you get older and are trying to live a decent, honorable life, is it work or love? What's life about? First I thought work, that is, making art, it's the only thing that can justify your existence (although that does seems a little too *intense*). Then love, naturally. I could ask you if friendship is

equally important, can they balance each other, melt into each other—if you know what I mean? We never got a chance to talk about it, because there were always so many friends around. And ambition, how do you deal with that?! Is it dangerous, or is it necessary to keep you from giving up just because the others are better? What if you're trying to impress rather than express—oh never mind.

It must be the same way with your photography.

I'm preparing canvases. Have found a place where I can buy sugar sacks and flour sacks cheap, an old warehouse. My studio is full of clean white surfaces. They seem threatening somehow. I've prepared them to be a little less absorbent this time, more mineral oil.

P.S. Living honorably, I mean with dignity—Samuli said once that the whole secret is to live with some kind of dignity. I didn't understand. Now I think he meant something about standing behind your idea, your purpose, leaning on it and believing in it and never yielding. Never abandon your guiding principle, he said, that's the only thing that's really dangerous. Never go against your true nature.

I assume he was talking about painting. He never talks about anything else.

Do you know what he said about you when I ran into him on the street? He said, "She's a brave girl but a little too impulsive. Say hello when you write to her."

Then that evening Tapsa came up and bless me if he didn't also start preaching about the right way to live (but he wasn't nearly so profound). He said, "You try to live rightly but I try to live richly. It's like a meadow where I pick flowers right and left as the spirit takes me, but you walk straight across and come out the other side empty-handed because you haven't found exactly the flower you wanted." I started thinking about that of course, but all I said was something dismissive about simplistic symbolism and when has he ever seen me empty-handed? I can't keep hold of everything that comes my way, but that has nothing to do with it. Last night I dreamed that I came to New York and you weren't there, you weren't anywhere. The streets were empty and horrible, the way they are in dreams. And suddenly I knew that you didn't want me there at all, you had run away and

didn't want to know me!

I'm mad at you.

So long for now.

A Tuesday

Dear Eva,

By now you must be there. I can picture your arrival. Everyone's standing on deck, it's cold and windy, you pass the Statue of Liberty but you don't bother to photograph it, you wait, you hold your luggage as closely as you can—it could get lost in the terrible crowd, you never know. You hold your camera to your breast the whole time. You swarm ashore, are herded slowly ashore, sorted . . . The customs hall is enormous! It is bursting with relief, with terror and confusion!

Was he there to meet you, your uncle, was he nice? How did you recognize each other—a photograph, a flower in a buttonhole? I forgot to ask.

And did you make new friends on the way over? You make friends so easily. But maybe they couldn't think about anything except getting across, they couldn't think about anything but themselves.

But all of that has already happened.

Everyone calls to ask if I've heard from you, which makes me feel sort of proud, you seem to have friends everywhere, at Artek, at the dairy store and the shop on the corner, at the post office, people on the stairs and on the street, everyone asks how Eva Konikova is doing, and I say just great, she's conquering Manhattan! Everyone says the nicest things about you! A letter came from a "Klas"? The charwoman wanted to know what she's to do with those ragged old rugs and I said, that's OK, you keep them. Who should get the green bag that's locked? Ada says hello. I don't dare ask if she's paid the rent for your guest room. She's unfocused. Right now she's painting lampshades. Her portrait has improved a bit. Had thought I'd give it to her, but maybe that's not such a good idea. Anyway, all she can think about is running off to Sweden before the war breaks out.

And I'm enclosing the list of *Questions*, now please be nice and help me sort out your junk and get it to the right places. Please?

Your mother calls all the time.

One thing comforts me. You're going to find new friends over

there, they just won't be able to help liking you! But will they understand your work? For example, if Eva Konikova photographs skyscrapers in a snowstorm, will they realize that no one's ever portrayed them before, not this way, never so overwhelmingly and convincingly? I know I'm not supposed to ask about your job—but anyway, will you get any chance at all to do your own work? Astound those Americans, make them see! For that matter, I don't believe for a second that skyscrapers press you down, maybe they just lift the sky higher!

Of course it's wrong to write letters instead of waiting till I hear from you, so now I'm going to wait, and when you get a bunch of letters at the same time, you should do like the Englishman in the jungle—who read his *Times* by date. Then you'll know more precisely when I was being too hasty, for example, or that I can be sorry even before I've behaved badly, and that I can love being alone at the same time I'm feeling abandoned—so skip that stuff!

And skip the stuff about not being able to work. I can't work myself. And so what? (English translation: And so what?)

Tove

Dearest Eva,

Boris came up and wanted to talk about you. He said you were his teacher. You could tell stories, he said, so that people hearing you could *see* everything as if they were there. "Sometimes the neighbors would pool their money for one movie ticket, that was back in St. Petersburg, and then when my sister came back, they'd be sitting there waiting and she'd relate the whole film from beginning to end. She knew every part, she'd do the children, she'd be the houses and the landscape!"

"I know," I said.

"She took care of me," Boris said. "Grandmother sent us out to find food in the backyards. It was exciting, and we both liked cats."

And then came the dramatic story about how those two children crossed the border in a snowstorm, and on the other side they waited for several days and just cried and cried (why do Russians always weep so dreadfully?), and then the funny story about how you took him to the doctor and said, "My little brother can't talk, what should we do with him?" And the doctor

asked what language you spoke at home, and you said Yiddish, Russian, French, and German, and he said let the boy make up his own mind! (That's actually a very old story, you know.)

Eva, as many languages as Boris can manage, you don't need to worry that they'll send him to the front.

He wondered too if he ought to follow your lead and go to America, would that be better? What would Eva say?

He said, "Here I know what I have, but how do I know what I might get?"

Eva, you've had to make decisions for so many, give them a kick in the pants to get them to leave or else get them to stay, but right now you don't have to worry about deciding. Give us time, please. And give yourself a long, long time.

Everything here is unchanged. Everyone says roughly the same things about the war that's coming but still doesn't come.

They say it takes months for a letter to get to America. But I write anyway.

Tove

Hi, it's Sunday.

Yesterday Ada came over and said that if I'm going to finish her portrait I'd better hurry up because she's got a visa and a job in Stockholm. She sends her very best. So I took out the canvas and made it *much* better. I've emphasized the white coat with its bright flowers and made the background neutral and tried to capture a note of indolence and resigned calm in her face, you know, generations of suffering—but she said it looked like she was sick to her stomach. Ha ha.

It was her laundry the super asked about, not yours at all.

Once I got going, I took out your portrait too and livened up the background. Although you're at rest, there can be no suggestion of indolence here, the viewer needs to feel that you could leap to your feet any second, ready for anything!

I made the light from above a little colder. Maybe I can show it at Young Artists, if that exhibition even comes off. Everyone's already gone.

We wait.

Maybe I'm fussing too much—no, too long—with this picture because I need to know what I want, or what I'll maybe come to understand, and that can slowly kill a painting, don't you think?

Or am I just afraid of putting a new empty canvas on my easel?

You know what Abrascha said about the portrait? “You can’t paint my sister in her petticoat!”

Did you ever stop to think that *nature morte* means “dead nature”?

It never felt this way before. But now, suddenly, imagine blue dominant, a blue teapot, maybe, and these apples and the unavoidable drapery, all of it as usual, completely as usual, and suddenly all of it’s unnecessary! Eva, the most important things have become unnecessary! They’ve made it into another world—no, we’ve allowed it to become a different world, where we no longer belong. Of course it’s always been hard to paint, but now there’s simply no point, and all because of the war!

Hi,

The autumn exhibition has been called off. Also Young Artists and Hörhammer’s competition and Art Week. In addition to *Garm*, I’ve done work for *Astra*, the *Christmas Star*, and *Swedish Soil*, where I do one political drawing a week.

Where are you, why don’t you write?!

I had a large rubber intarsia approved in sketch, but now the directors are blaming the times. They’re all doing it, whether they sell rotten mushrooms that the woods are full of or they want a painting for a seven-story corporate palace.

People talk of nothing but war.

I have hopes of selling a large Åland painting at the Art Salon, the one on Robert Street. The salon takes twenty percent.

One day I was painting by the harbor and various blockheads came up and said, “Miss, you ought to go home and make babies instead, because there’s going to be a war any day now.”

Didn’t get the grant. I suspect they think I’m rich from illustrations. Or else they simply don’t like my paintings.

Sometimes I think that everything I’ve done so far is crap, completely worthless and utterly irrelevant. I need to move to larger, calmer surfaces and less drawing. Certain days everything just stands still, it’s as if I had never painted before. They say that such periods usually mean that you’re making progress, that you’re about to take a big leap forward. I don’t believe it!

Everything just stands still, you just sit there in your own piss.

I ponder this by choice and by duty, and I get nowhere. And

I'm suspicious of ambition, deeply!

Koni, my paintings aren't good, but they get *better* with every exhibition, anyway a little better, maybe, and that's all I care about. They say I paint too much with my brain, how can they know that my heart wants to break every time, and for that matter it seems to me most of those spontaneous geniuses paint with their *stomachs*!

And just wait till I show my self-portrait with the lynx-fur wrap!

It feels odd writing letters that don't arrive, and then when they do arrive everything is different, not true anymore.

And I get sort of seduced into using words that are too big.

And if those letters arrive after all, a whole clutch of them, then I'm not at all sure she'll be happy with them, maybe she'll be annoyed that I miss her, perhaps she simply hasn't *had time* to miss us?

Yes, of course. And then all at once she has to put together a letter that narrates and comforts and asks questions, and she's just plain tired. Leave her alone.

I'll wait a bit. Or not send them. But that letter about your arrival in New York I will send, because it's good. I have to tell you that no one wants to have parties anymore.

Konikova enters. Tableau! She pauses for a conscious moment in the door, we observe her and know that now there will be a party. She puts the wine and the pierogi on the table, she claps her hands and laughs! No one has a mouth as big or as cheerful.

How did you have time for us? How could you afford to squander yourself so carelessly, you made us try to do the same as best we could, and we flung out all our secrets like flowers and it was all free, free with no bad conscience, and I can't understand how it all happened!

Now, when we sometimes get together, we're almost embarrassed.

It's your fault!

Good morning!

Tapsa told me he ran after a girl halfway down Alexander Street because he thought it was you (dumb). He says he's bored

after all your lofty political discussions.

And just let me say once and for all that I listened to more than enough of them, with all the Social Responsibility and the Social Consciousness and the Great Masses, and I might as well say straight out that I don't believe in art with a political message, I believe in *l'art pour l'art* and that's all there is to it!

Tapsa says I'm an art snob and my painting is asocial. Is a *nature morte* with apples asocial!? What about Cézanne's apples, the very Essence of Apple, the definitive perception?!

Tapsa says that Dalí paints only for himself. Who else should he paint for? That's what I want to know. While you're working, you don't think about other people, you *can't*! I think every canvas—

nature morte, landscape, whatever—is, at its core, a self-portrait.

I mean, take your photographs. I know your pictures, snapshots of tenderness and cruelty, of everything imaginable, but every one of them is in some way a picture of yourself, isn't that right?

It has nothing to do with advocacy, neither one way nor the other, your pictures are convincing because they're genuine, they don't show anything other than the way it is.

Why do you always *talk* so much?

Work should be quiet. We work in such different ways. You get an image of the moment, of what's happening right now and never again. I work very slowly—but tell me now, don't we *see* very much the same way? Don't we?

Tapsa sends massive greetings, Samuli too. I'm a little proud of the fact that it's always me they ask to say hello.

Hope I've annoyed you.

So long for now,
Tove

P.S. Sorry, I probably shouldn't have been so long-winded.

Koni,

I've been thinking about solitude. Maybe I've never experienced it for real, just small bits of feeling alone, like when something gets turned down or someone important goes away—

or, even worse, when I can't work.

I believe that solitude could be a wonderful thing if we're sufficiently careful with it. Just think of the possibilities we have, if only we choose them in time. But I don't really know.

Do you always know?

And finally, what's the meaning of that violent desire to form, to produce, compared with the need to help!

I don't know. We forgot to talk about that because things happened so fast.

Me again

Another morning

Can you believe it, the Society of Illustrators has bought three of my drawings for its collection, altogether 9,000 marks! I was so happy I paid all my back membership dues and my last tax bill, which to my horror I found in a pocket, so now I've paid *all* my debts, plus my bank loan. What's more, the government at long last has developed a bad conscience and sent me 4,000 that they'd over-deducted on the grounds that "you never know what artists are up to." Guess what they said in today's paper, now that they're trying to scrape people together for work details. They're making a terrible fuss about vagrants, Gypsies, artists, and "other refractory elements." Isn't that hilarious?

I've been studying a map of the world, noting down places that put a name on yearning, dreams to share with another traveler when things get back to normal.

Don't tell me I'm being sentimental, because I never am!

And there you sit on Manhattan growing wiser and wiser.

Why don't you write!

So long for now—
Tove

I've lost her face, I can't remember what she looks like. It's awful. And I don't dare look at the portrait because that will push her even farther away, so I've turned the canvas to the wall.

I'm not going to write any more letters now.

Not until the war has started, which will be soon.

And I won't write to her so she gets a bad conscience about us, and not about longing and art politics and all that. No, I really need to think of her feelings.

Or else I'll write about *all of it*, bang, but only for my own sake (like Dalí) and utterly and absolutely not give a damn about her feelings.

Translated by Thomas Teal

MESSAGES

I'LL MAKE it to Maritim, got hold of Gustafsson, van coming at 8, have redirected mail to summer address, bye kiss Tooti Take last things out of fridge

Hi my name is Olavi. You write well but last time you didn't make a happy ending. Why do you do this?

We look forward to your valued reply soonest concerning Moomin motifs on toilet paper in pastel shades

Don't say too much if they ring, don't promise yet. Bye Tooti

Hi! We're three girls in a mad rush with our essays about you could you help us by saying in just a few words how you started writing and why and what life means to you and then a message to young people you know the kind of thing. Thanks in advance

Dear Miss Jansson, You must understand that the only way I can earn a living are panholders with Moomin figures which I design myself and make in the kitchen without any paid help at present. How would 6% be for a start

Hi, I'm thinking of becoming a writer, can you help me with a little information? Is it all right to send your MS to several publishers simultaneously and is it better or worse with illustrations? And about contracts

One shimmering moonlit night I got up and do you know what I did . . . I went out into the park and danced in my nightie! Maybe no one saw me but maybe someone . . . Do you understand? Write

You are a really sinful person on top of everything else, but don't think you're safe, you're being watched every moment because we're there and we're waiting

My dear friend, I've been thinking of you so long now that it's really time I plucked up courage to ask a little boon of you; could you sometime when you feel like it draw all your sweet little figures in color for my granddaughter Emanuela

Hi coming later heat the soup
Kiss, T

My hamsters have been named after you and your brother. I had a christening party on my fortieth birthday but Astrid Lindgren didn't come.

You each had a rosette around your tummy. It's been an uncommonly cold winter and folk who are uncared for freeze to death, one morning you were both dead on the balcony. I'm thinking of having a funeral on Riddarholmen island, best wishes

We are contacting you in connection with this year's marmalade promotion, in the first instance wondering if there would be any chance of a previously unpublished Moomin comic strip on the theme of marmalade

What steel pen do you use to draw your comic strips? Everything I've found seems old-fashioned and the new ones are useless. Can you give me a copy of the usual contract and I'd also very much like to know a little more about world rights

Dear Miss Jansson
I have produced Moomin pictures for my home and also for profit and pleasure and placed them for sale in art galleries and kiosks bordering busy traffic routes. Now one of my friends is saying one ought to ask permission, can this be true? If I don't hear from you before week 5 shall go on as usual

Insufficient address
Father Christmas Moomin Valley.
Please give current address and surname

We are fully aware that you had planned a black troll for our Moomin liquor ice advertisement, but for technical reasons

What shall I do with my parents, they're becoming more and more hopeless. Write!

Couldn't we meet and chat about the old days at school? I'm Margit, the one who punched you in the stomach in the playground

We look forward to your comments concerning the foregoing account in connection with earlier uncompleted agreements and taking into account secondary effects to which our most recent market discharge may have given rise we would be glad if in urgent order

Now don't be afraid, but have you any understanding whatever of what your comic strips can mean for expectant mothers, how great a responsibility you bear? Have you even remotely grasped what it can mean for expectant mothers to be constantly confronted with those snouts—how do you think the next generation may look

My cat's died! Write at once

Hi dear unknown fairy-tale auntie, we're a group of young folks with Ideas! What d'you think? Are you up for it?
Luv, Plastic Ltd, "Now or Never" project

Dear Jansson san
I have collected money for a long time. I will come and sit at your feet to understand. Please when can I come there?

Last night they came in again. They're everywhere. Please come,

I implore you

Could you consider becoming patron of this constantly threatened little area of natural beauty

How could you even consider invading this constantly threatened little area of natural beauty

We've launched a discreet new mini sanitary towel—earlier design Peach Bloom Ltd—but now we're aiming at a younger clientele with the slogan "Hi there, Little My always plays safe"—a bit of fun which with your kind permission

Can't you draw me a Snufkin that I can have tattooed on my arm as a symbol of freedom

I don't know why I'm writing but I must because my heart is so big tonight throw away these lines forget them don't bother to read them if you feel embarrassed but please be terribly kind and answer if you possibly can

It was you who murdered Karin Boye*

Hi, took the mail with me
Kiss, T

Is it OK for you to transfer my fee to Sri Lanka? My latest translation into Esperanto can't be ready till New Year. I hope you will be patient

In your story The Cat you change cat twice and that's heartless. As a member of the RSPCA I must

I thought it might make you happy to know that there is someone who has everything that life can offer. It's true of me and I'm thankful. But the one thing I long to do is create. My therapist recommends watercolors and suggested I should phone

you. It's a matter of choice of colors and motifs

My very dear friend you are wallowing in sin. A Voice has spoken to me and now I pray for you every night which makes me so tired. I enclose some Tracts, read them and let me know if things go better. Hold out. There is an explanation and forgiveness for everything

This is a message in a bottle for Toffle from Australia. If the paper gets wet on the way ask your mommy to iron it dry

Have you forgotten your baby's fiftieth birthday? Have you read my letters? Have you got my presents? Don't tell me you're old and tired. I won't stop writing—I'll never let go of you!

I brought the washing in, you can put the potatoes on at 6. Someone called Anttiia phoned

Dear Jansson san
Take good care of yourself in this dangerous world
Please have a long life
With love

Translated by Silvester Mazzarella

* Karin Boye: Swedish poet, novelist, and story writer who took her own life in 1941.